

Chapter 621 Ganged Up

"Hahaha, the Reinaldians are taking a load of flack for the deaths!" Captain Orfan laughed as she patched into a news feed.

Throughout this entire ordeal, the planet had never lost connection to the galactic net. The neighboring states got to follow the chaos live as it happened!

In any case, the problem the outfits pushed onto the Reinaldians had already led to a firestorm of criticism and blame. Foreign diplomats went livid while Reinaldian politicians argued about the next course of action.

One political faction argued that since they already drew some blood, they might as well go all the way. Another political faction wanted to wash their hands of the incident entirely and ensure the deaths did not continue to pile up. Many Reinaldians scratched their head about the blockade. Why did they need to keep the foreign tourists prisoner on Harkensen I?

Ves only found it regretful that he couldn't identify the player among the Reinaldians. The aggressive faction counted too many Reinaldian bigwigs among their number. The player who pushed this cart along could be anyone of those figures.

If the player was smart enough, he or she would have kept themselves neutral instead, opting to achieve their goals by directing their pawns.

It seemed like every other player stuck to the rules of the game as well. Secrecy was paramount. No matter what, their identities could never be exposed in public.

"Right now, they're in the dark, and we're the chumps who they've pushed out in the light."

Naturally, the individual outfits who incited the butchery received plenty of accusations as well. The heroic halo cast upon the Flagrant Vandals had instantly been torn down. The Bright Republic went from worshipping their heroics to casting them aside like pieces of dirt.

"Feh. Typical." The mech captain spat. "There's no pleasing this crowd of soft-hearted cowards."

"We did go over the line, captain." Ves spoke. "This escalation of violence is too extreme. While it feels good to take the Reinaldians down a notch, we are still risking our lives by trying to challenge an entire state."

She waved her hand dismissively. "It won't go that far. Nobody wants to change the status quo, the Reinaldians least of all. They've got a good thing going right now, but the only way they can keep raking in the money is if they don't piss off too many states. If everyone is turning against them, their dreams of running a profitable trade hub will crash and burn."

That sounded surprisingly sophisticated coming from her mouth. Ves guessed that she merely parroted the analysis of a logistics officer or something.

Ves looked around as he exited the shuttle. "Well, here we are. In possession of some transports."

These large interplanetary vessels formed the lifeblood of interplanetary trade. They possessed enough thrust to transport cargo between different planets without taking too much time.

Smaller than interstellar cargo haulers, they also lacked FTL drives as well as advanced life support. This increased the difficulty of their escape. They couldn't rely on these transport vessels to escape the Harkensen System.

He glanced at the serial number stamped on the hull of the transport. The vessel wasn't worthy of receiving a true ship name. Considering its paperthin armor and cheap construction, Ves could hardly blame this decision.

"This transport is two or three cannon impacts away from decompression."

"It's the best we got, Mr. Larkinson. The Masters of Combat and their ilk are hogging the best ships for themselves."

He turned around and noted the members of the other outfits crawling over the biggest ships. A large number of mechs stood on guard while fueling vehicles slowly filled up the tank.

The ships and vessels in possession of the outfits received the best treatment, but the other vessels received some attention as well. Smaller fueling bots paid a visit to each shuttle and spurted some fuel in their empty tanks.

In order for the next phase of the plan to work, the Vandals and their temporary partners still needed the civilians to act as their shield. That meant they needed to divert some effort into refueling all of those shuttles and other passenger craft.

Ves entered the transport along with a lot of other Vandals. The interior cargo holds lacked any form of seating or other comforts, but the Vandals already thought about that. Teams of mech technicians brought in foldable benches and crudely bolted them to the floor. They weren't crash seats, but the benches would be sufficient to keep the Vandals in place if the transport met some mishap along the way.

Half an hour passed as everyone raced to get their act together. Taking control over the ships and filling them up with passengers and cargo took a lot of time. If they hadn't planned all of their moves beforehand then it could have easily taken twice as long to get their act ready.

"Hurry up! Planetary Guard reinforcements are on the way. They're bringing out the big guns!"

The Big Breakout's success depended on whether the outfits moved fast enough. The moment they slowed down, the vengeful Reinaldians would certainly catch up!

Just as they finished loading in their cargo, something unexpected happened. The mechs piloted by the Masters of Combat suddenly turned on the Vandal-controlled Water Wraiths!

"Damn it, I knew those Vesians couldn't be trusted!"

The abrupt shelling heavily damaged the Water Wraiths. WW-4 outright malfunctioned and its pilot immediately ejected. WW-1, WW-2 and WW-3 immediately counterattacked in the vague direction of the Masters of Combat. The mechs controlled by the Masters of Combat immediately came under pressure. Though the Vesian mercenary corps managed to scavenge more mechs, they hadn't been able to restore their condition as well as the Water Wraiths!

Two of their mechs had fallen, and the rest immediately fell back. It became apparent that the Masters of Combat hadn't expected the Water Wraiths to hold up so well!

Ves looked around and saw a nearby mech officer hollering at his comm for the fighting to stop! They hadn't even completed their escape yet. There was no reason to turn against each other!

"What is the meaning of your hostility! The Big Breakout is still in progress! You are risking everything we have gained!"

The other outfits shied away from the spontaneous battle between the Masters of Combat and the Flagrant Vandals. Instead, they accelerated their preparations and hastened to lift off into the air.

Then, for some reason, they engaged hostilities against each other!

The mechs piloted by Lydia's Swordmaidens, the Caged and Blooddriven Sky all ganged up on the Glorious Space Knights for some reason!

Everything went to hell at the spaceport. Numerous shuttles filled with scared and frightened civilians exploded or vaporized as they got hit with errant shells or laser beams!

Many of the shuttlecraft piloted exclusively by civilians already made their way out. Having survived one active battlefield, they thoroughly became frightened at the thought of suffering the same helplessness all over again.

"Let's go let's go let's go! Forget about the mechs!"

Many of their transports started lifting off. Meanwhile, the mech pilots of the Water Wraiths steadily abandoned their mechs and attempting to board a nearby shuttle.

The Masters of Combat attempted to keep the Vandals in place by shooting at their vessels. However, the Vandals hadn't gone up into the air straight away. Instead, they attempted to mix with the other outfits, finally forcing the Masters of Combat to hit a couple of mechs controlled by the Caged.

The mechs of the Caged immediately pulled back from assaulting the Glorious Space Knights and turned against the Vesians!

"You crazies! Stop firing at us!" The lead mech of the Masters of Combat broadcasted. "We did not mean to hit your mechs!"

"We don't care! Nobody messes with the Caged and lives!"

The tangled conflict resulted in an enormous amount of collateral damage. The escape went ahead as thousands of small craft and larger craft flew into the air and sought to increase their distance from the spaceport. Most of them aimed to fly directly upwards until they escaped the planet's gravity well.

The fighting died down a bit on account of the evacuation. Out of every outfit, the Glorious Space Knights suffered the most. None of their mechs survived against the combined forces of three other outfits. The Masters of Combat joined up in the end as well.

With the mechs of the Glorious Space Knights down, the ships appropriated by the playboys and well-paid professionals attempted to make a getaway, only to get shot by the other mechs.

Ves immediately noted that the mechs tried to aim for the engines and other non-essential sections. The outfits didn't aim to destroy the spacecraft, but merely wanted to keep them in place!

Teams of armored infantrymen approached the vessels and broke into them without any compunction. This told him that the other outfits needed something from the Glorious Space Knights.

Could it be a Megalodon chip?

Ves shook his head. "Whatever they're up to, I'd rather get away!"

Compared to the Vesian animosity to the Vandals, attempting to obtain an encrypted data chip ranked much higher in their priorities. Though a few shuttles from the Vandals had been downed by their mechs, the larger transports still held up.

The craft boarded by the civilians and the Flagrant Vandals took the lead. Several other ships from the other outfits followed close at hand, though they left a part of their forces behind.

Every Vandal aboard the transport Ves was on had strapped themselves to their seats. For now, the transport's artificial gravity and inertial compensators prevented the passengers from getting squashed against the deck or some other surface. These vessels often carried various kinds of cargo, some of

which must have been fragile. As long as the transports hadn't incurred any damage, the Vandals had nothing to worry about.

Ves activated his comm and patched into an internal feed that displayed their position. The vessels of the Vandals stuck close to each other as they finally departed from the surface of Harkensen I.

A large number of civilian shuttles followed in their wake. They had nowhere else to go and they instinctively flocked to the largest gathering of vessels. Of course, many other shuttles opted to get away from the outfits and immediately split up in order to get away from those recklessly dangerous outfits!

"Soon enough, we'll be bumping into the blockade."

The Reinaldan spaceborn assets hadn't sat idle while the surface of the planet descended into chaos. Many mechs of the Honored Ones had split up into squads and attempted to envelop the entire globe. With the sheer amount of Reinaldan mechs, there was no way the Vandals could sneak away through a gap in their patrols.

This wasn't even the most effective net. The blockade might have been able to stop a few small craft at a time, but facing hundreds of tiny vessels presented many of the same difficulties faced by the mechs at the spaceport. However, this time the Reinaldians hadn't been able to bring their planetary guard mechs.

Exacerbating the situation was that many starships showed up at a high orbit. Each of these ships was connected to an individual or a group on the ground. Keeping the foreign ships in place forced the Reinaldians to divert a lot of unnecessary strength to keep them out of their gates.

In essence, the spaceborn mechs of the Honored Ones were being stretched thin because they needed to keep an eye on ships coming from the surface and from deep space!

"We've established contact with the fleet!"

Captain Orfan's comm lit up as a projection of Major Verle appeared in front of her face! They had all missed his presence, and it was incredibly reassuring to see him once again!

"You've done the best you could, Vandals. We'll be reunited in time." He said, reassuring many Vandals that salvation was at hand!

Chapter 622 Lost Will

With thousands of transports, shuttlecraft and a couple of extravagant souped-up aircars rated for vacuum climbing up into space, the Reinaldans had another sticky situation on their hands. The mechs on patrol in orbit attempted to halt a handful of shuttles, only to have ten more pass them by. They simply didn't have the numbers to block the escaping craft.

On the other side of their blockade, the starships waiting for their associates on Harkensen I to arrive were coming closer and closer. Some of the ships that belonged to various outfits even deployed their mechs as an open threat against the Reinaldans!

The ships and mechs of the Flagrant Vandals happened to be among them as well. Every outfit stuck on the surface of Harkensen I had backup waiting for them at space. Blending in the masses of other ships, they impatiently waited for days for their employers, owners, outfit members and so on to arrive in space.

Ves accessed the galactic net from his comm as the transport he had boarded almost reached into low orbit. He browsed the news portal and saw that most publications had turned against the Reinaldans.

Looks like the Honored Ones aren't able to justify their actions anymore.

Certainly, the Reinaldans couldn't be blamed. Most of them merely acted upon orders, and they weren't even responsible for most of the violence. The blame lay squarely on the terrorists who launched a surprise attack on Harkensen I. Beyond that, the Flagrant Vandals and the outfits they partnered with deserved some condemnation as well for driving so many civilians to their deaths.

The worst thing about this course of events was that most people would never find out the truth behind the outburst of violence. Perhaps on the surface, most people believed this event was meant to harm the lifeblood of the Harkensen System. Only a handful of those involved knew that the fighting involved more than giving the Reinaldans a kick in the nuts.

"Tens of millions have died so far... and for what? Just so an old fart can postpone his death for a couple of hundred years?"

Humans never succeeded in cracking the secret to immortality. Yet they did manage to obtain the next-best solution. Even though the cost of life-prolonging treatments became prohibitively more expensive, so many power players still chased after this distant dream like ducks.

Hope. No matter how faint, one couldn't help but hold even as it burned their fingers.

If all of those old and powerful people believed that extending their lives wasn't humanly possible, then they would have aged gracefully and faded into the background to let the next generation bloom.

Yet the introduction of life-prolonging treatments changed the way humanity ruled forever. Ever since this medical treatment came into being, old farts kept risking their accumulated wealth, power and legacy for a faint hope of

delaying their deaths. Everything they obtained turned into currency that they didn't hesitate to spend in order to succeed in fulfilling their greatest hope.

"What are you thinking about, Mr. Larkinson?" Captain Orfan looked suspiciously at Ves.

The two sat across from each other close to the bow of the transport vessel. The crude benches made for an uncomfortable seat, and Ves squirmed a bit as he tried to form an excuse. He couldn't blab about the secret behind the secret conflict.

"I'm worried about our fleet who's waiting on the other side of the blockade, captain. I imagine the Reinaldans won't let us go. We're one of the main groups responsible for the butchery at Tecev City's spaceport."

"We've already planned for that." She grinned back. "Even if the Masters of Combat stabbed us in the back in passing, they should still stick to what we've agreed to if they know what's best for them. Still, what's the deal with the Glorious Space Knights? Did one of their punks try to seduce a Swordmaiden or something?"

"I don't know. I'm thankful they didn't decide to gang up on us. I'm not sure why they attracted so much animosity, but it has nothing to do with us."

He lied, of course, but Captain Orfan didn't have to know that. From his judgement so far, Captain Orfan didn't appear to be an insider. She lacked the restraint and discretion necessary to keep such a big secret.

"I do say, the Water Wraiths held up better against the surprise attack than I thought. You did a really good job with fixing up those amphibian mechs."

Ves smiled at the compliment. "I'm just doing my job. It helped a lot to gain access to the facilities of the shipyard. From what I've seen, the other outfits hadn't been able to secure any workshops. The mechs from the Masters of Combat look so shabby that they likely fixed them up in field conditions."

Even though he ribbed the durability of the Water Wraiths, the amphibian mechs had partially been built to fight underwater. The extra mass they took on formed considerable obstacles that made it difficult for the mechs to be taken out very quickly.

Three of the Water Wraiths appeared to be able to slug it out for at least a minute of trading volleys. WW-4's quick end had been a fluke resulting from a rushed and inefficient restoration process.

"Hehe, if you hadn't made those Water Wraiths so tough, we would have been ganged up by the rest as well. Did you notice that we never targeted their transports, and vica versa? Both of us were afraid we'd shoot our main rides. As long as we showed any weaknesses, the Masters of Combat would have pounced on us. Since that never happened, both of us held guns against each other's heads."

"Nobody wants to pull the trigger in that case."

The Flagrant Vandals showed enough strength to deter the Masters of Combat from escalating the fight. Mutual self-destruction hadn't been an option to the Vesians.

A ping sounded out. It was a warning for imminent action.

"We're about to run the blockade! Get ready, this might get rough!"

The transport began to shake and heave as its thrusters suddenly received a dollop of power. The pilot at the helm decisively strained the poor vessel's propulsion to its limits!

The extra boost in speed and acceleration added pressure to the Reinaldans and cut short the time available to come up with a solution. On the other side of the blockade, the Vandal fleet and the other starships on the outside started to stir up trouble as well.

Through a mix of deception and incitement, several uninvolved starships began to move closer. The Reinaldan patrols attempted to halt the ships from nearing the planet, but their warnings seemed to lack sufficient force.

"Halt! This planet's orbit is restricted space!"

"Get lost, you greedy pigs! My corps commander is on his way up, and I won't let you shoot him down!"

If the Reinaldians stationed more mechs in orbit, they could have made a better effort. As it was, they still hadn't gotten over the confusion in their chain of command. Different commanders demanded different responses, and the rank-and-file had put up their own stance on the matter.

Thus, when ordered to halt the starships from closing in with the small craft coming up from the surface, the majority of the Honored Ones only blustered while keeping their fingers off the trigger.

Some of the Vandals aboard the transport blinked when nothing happened.

"We prepared a lot of fireworks." Captain Orfan said despondently. "A couple of ships and shuttles would have blown up if the Reinaldians wanted to play hardball."

She sounded genuinely disappointed that they didn't get the opportunity to sow more chaos. Many other Vandals shared her feelings. Ves simply sighed.

With the mechs in orbit standing aside, the shuttles eagerly sought out their starships and returned to the fold. The Vandal transports and shuttles effortlessly met up with the Shield of Hispania, the Finmoth Regal and all the other ships of the Vandals.

All of them had been fixed up at the commercial shipyards orbiting over Harkensen III. All of their scars had disappeared as the shipyards had done a thorough job in replacing the damaged armor plating.

The transports were too large to enter the hangar bays of the combat carriers. The vessels had to park alongside one of the hatches of the combat carriers and extend a docking bridge in order to let the Vandals in.

The cargo containers the Vandals brought along had to be ejected into space to allow other shuttles to bring them in the cargo bays of the starships.

Ves thought about the infiltrators that may have been hidden in the containers. Had they sneaked off into space at this time, or did they intend to hitch a ride with the Vandal fleet?

"I hope not. Those fellows aren't friends."

He gratefully stepped back aboard the Shield of Hispania. He missed this old ship. The familiar interior map of the combat carrier reappeared in his mind, and he immediately marched towards the command center. Upon entering, he sat at his customary observer's seat, only lamenting the absence of a capable assistant.

"Mr. Larkinson, good for you to join us again." Major Verle said. His expression appeared rather glum. "I need to have some words with you after we handle this crisis. You and the rest who goofed off in Harkensen I. For heaven's sake, we have made an oath to protect our citizens, not use them up as human shields!"

Nobody liked to be blamed for causing so many civilian casualties. Especially when it had been a deliberate act on their part.

Ves held up his hands as if Verle was from the Planetary Guard. "I don't like it either, sir, but the plan was going ahead whether we liked it or not. Something very fishy was going on down there, and it seems to have driven some people to extremes."

The major's eyes narrowed at him. That had been a veiled jab at the mech officer.

"I may have directed my ire to the wrong person." Verle conceded. "You are not the person in charge. I'll have to obtain some answers from someone else."

Likely, Captain Orfan was going to have a bad time in the coming days. As the principal decision maker on the ground, her decisive leadership had won her plenty of kudos from the other Vandals. However, her sheer callousness ruined the hard-earned reputation of the Vandals had gained in recent months.

Once the starships slowly picked up their passengers, they made their way out of the star system as fast as possible under the auspices of the Reinaldans. None of the mechs of the Honored Ones moved to stop them from taking off. Perhaps the conflicting orders in their chain of command had already been sorted out, because they didn't act in futility.

Each outfit involved in taking over Tecev City's spaceport split off and went their separate ways. Besides the ships of the Glorious Space Knights, every other outfit headed towards a different Lagrange point, all the while remaining alert for any sudden moves by the Reinaldans or everyone else.

Ves did not concern himself with these matters. He went back to his old job and started to catalog the mechs the repair businesses had painstakingly fixed in the last four weeks. A visual inspection of the projections of the repaired mechs already showed some inconsistencies.

"Damn it, they slacked off once I was gone!"

During the time he supervised the repair work, the bosses had been fairly diligent in meeting his expectations. All of that ended once he toured Harkensen III and Harkensen I. While the mechs didn't appear to be broken in any way, Ves would definitely have his hands full with fixing the quality issues.

After all, since the Vandals recently bought a batch of high-gravity mech equipment, their next destination was very likely going to be a Super Earth! One small problem inside a landbound mech might be magnified to a ruinous proportion once the local gravity multiplied by five!

"Seems like I've got a lot of work on my hands again."

Chapter 623 Vengeful

The events on Harkensen I revealed that not even the Reinald Republic could escape the rising tide of war. Trouble lurked in every corner. It could pop up at any planet at any time.

The debates on what truly happened at that planet turned the galactic net into a separate battlefield. Public opinion see-sawed between one extreme to the next. One day, the prevailing opinion regarded the Reinald Republic as victims. The next, they were painted as greedy merchants who were wildly out of touch with reality.

In any case, everyone smelled a purge. Conflicts within the upper ranks in the government and military revealed stark contradictions between their factions. Reconciling their differences could only be achieved when heads started to roll. Many officials readied themselves for war among themselves.

The mysterious terrorists who had built up a massive presence on Harkensen I elicited many questions as well. Where did they come from, and what were their motives? Why did they spring their attack at this specific time?

Once the Reinaldians imposed some measure of order on the surface of Harkensen I, they finally picked off all of the wrecks and started to trace their origins. Naturally, if the terrorists had been even mildly competent, the mechs shouldn't have revealed any clues.

Ves knew this for certain, because he already combed over the Water Wraith the Vandals recovered.

"Other than the fact that their design comes from Vicious Mountain, there's nothing else that stands out."

Potential meddling from neighboring star sectors aside, Ves kept wrangling his head around Miss Calabast. Though she spoke with a distinct Vesian accent, his gut kept telling him her facade was only skin deep throughout their interactions.

"Is she from the Seven Stars? Or is she an agent from another intelligence agency?"

He frowned a bit. It would have made a lot of sense if she had been stationed in the Harkensen System as an asset of the Vesians.

There was no love lost between the Vesia Kingdom and the Reinald Republic. Undermining the hive of scum and villainy that was the Harkensen System definitely benefited Vesia the most of all. In fact, the galactic net had been leaning on that theory the most, objections from Vesian diplomats be damned.

He truly missed the presence of someone like Iris. Right now, he could really use a sounding board.

As the newly invigorated Vandals headed towards another star system, Major Verle finally called for another meeting. As Ves entered the conference room, he could tell the ones who lived through the mess at Harkensen I from the others. Those who survived the ordeal on the paradise planet kept their guard up at all times.

"Good. Everyone is here." The major said to his subordinates. "Let me begin by explaining our next mission. I know that many of you are hoping to return to the Bright Republic. That isn't on the table at this moment."

A wave of dissatisfaction ran through the officers in the meeting. Those physically present on the Shield of Hispania and those attending through projections both appeared rather frayed.

The shore leave was supposed to recharge their batteries, not drain them even further. Nobody had anticipated that everything had spun out of control. The Vandals still had to deal with the aftermath.

"I get it. You're tired. We're far away from home. We are squatting in the territory of a state that doesn't look kindly on us. However, we are soldiers! The war is still being raged back home, and the Bright Republic needs us here."

Captain Orfan spoke out. "Sir, we're with you and the Vandals all the way."

Not everyone appeared supportive of her statement. Many of them felt tired in a way. What did the Reinald Republic have to do with the war?

Fortunately, the major had a ready answer for that. He grinned at everyone. "What if I say we're about to get some payback on our enemies? During the previous escape, some of you came under fire from your erstwhile allies, the Masters of Combat. Those mercs from Venidse tested our defenses, and felled a number of our brothers."

The Masters of Combat shot down a couple of shuttles carrying Vandals and supplies. Overall, the casualties didn't amount to much in the larger scheme of things, but that was already a significant price to pay.

"Before they transitioned into FTL, I've ordered our navigation officers to trace the most likely destination of their fleet. As soon as we determined their destination, we've aimed at the same star system and followed suit."

Ves had a bad feeling about this. They hadn't even left Reinaldan space yet!

"Are we going to pile up on the Masters of Combat?"

"Good! They deserve to be taken down a notch!"

"They're Vesians! As far as I know, we should wipe them off the face of the galaxy!"

The mere prospect of beating up the Masters of Combat put a smile on everyone's faces. Uttering those confident boasts had lifted everyone's moods. Ves had to hand it to Major Verle. He truly knew how to pull everyone's strings.

The commanding officer pressed a button and a projection of fleet belonging to the Masters of Combat emerged.

"Before their departure from the Harkensen System, we've scanned the makeup of their fleet. Captain Rakeshir?"

The projection of the senior ship captain of the Antecedent stood up. "While we've failed to hack into their database, our analysts have drawn accurate models of their combat capabilities through a mixture of external scans and historical research. Overall, the Masters of Combat is a large Venidse-style mercenary corps that puts much of their emphasis on landbound combat. That's not to say their spaceborn assets are weak, but the Masters of Combat treat space battles as a necessary evil to secure their landbound forces from above."

The central projection cycled through different combat carriers, light carriers and large transport craft.

"Their fleet complement is rather barebones, but sufficient for a mercenary corps of their scale. Their most prized starships are their only two combat carriers. These twin vessels are slow and fat, but are able to perform a combat drop on a terrestrial planet securely due to their prodigious amount of armor. These ships are built like rocks and fly like one. The Masters of Combat have a habit of using them as the vanguard of an orbital drop near hostile territory."

The projection changed to display a number of light carriers.

"Their light carriers form the mainstay of their fleet. Although they are technically classified as light, their capacity is just as high as their combat carriers, and their armor is at the upper range in their ship class. They're tough as nuts and can take a beating any day. The only reason why they aren't classified as combat carriers is because they aren't rated to land on terrestrial planets."

A mercenary corps had to be frugal and couldn't afford to splurge on expensive ships. A combat carrier was the premier carrier class in the mercenary scene. The cost to commission and maintain a combat carrier could easily match the expenses of several light carriers. If the Masters of Combat replaced their light carriers with combat carriers, then it was impossible for them to turn a profit!

"The Masters of Combat utilize their light carriers to carry their second-line landbound companies and spaceborn companies. Their overall value is less, but don't mistake them for being pushovers. Their mech doctrine is nearly identical to Venidse's attrition warfare doctrine. The only element they are missing out on is high-tech stealth technology."

That was a big relief to everyone, including Ves. They'd been screwed by stealth technology several times.

"The scale of their operation is considerable for a mercenary corps." Captain Rakeshir summed up. "Currently, they are able to field five landbound mech companies and two spaceborn mech companies at once. Mind you, these numbers may not be entirely accurate, as the mech and personnel rolls of a mercenary corps is much more fluid than a military mech regiment like ours."

Ves raised his hand like a schoolkid in class. "What is the timeframe of the impending battle?"

"We'll fight immediately upon arrival at the next star system, a small industrial system called the Remoss System." Captain Rakeshir announced. "While the Masters of Combat and our fleet have departed to the Remoss System from different Lagrange points, the divergence shouldn't be too big. The gravitic tides our fleets are facing should be nearly identical, so very likely we'll arrive several hours and light-minutes away from each other. That is tight enough for us to converge on their fleet and force a battle before their FTL drives finishes cycling."

FTL drives sold in the private sector demanded longer cycle times than military-grade drives. Depending on the quality and condition of the drives, the total cycle time could take up to six hours.

The news that the Vandals intended to force a battle in the next few days was a little unsettling to the other Vandals. They didn't have much time to prepare and prep their men. Nonetheless, the Vandals would deal with it. At least they had some warning this time. The time where the Vandals were caught with their pants down on Harkensen I was a thing of the past.

Ves asked another question. "What are our exact objectives? Do we want to beat them up, wipe them out completely or are we after something more?"

He wanted to clarify this matter first, because he suspected that the Vandals hadn't chosen to stare at the Masters of Combat on a whim.

Revenge? Pff. As if the profit-oriented Vandals willingly threw themselves into battle over hard feelings.

Captain Rakeshir threw a gaze at Major Verle, who pressed his lips into a line. "The Masters of Combat is an extension of Vesian power. They maintain close ties to Venidse. Crushing them completely is a good deed for the Bright Republic, as we can deprive the Vendisans from hiring them as garrison troops. That said, their flagship should be captured and kept intact if possible.

Besides gathering valuable intelligence from the Glazed Omen's database, there are also other valuables that we'd like to obtain."

Some of the Vandals already dreamt of obtaining luxuries or other riches, but Ves knew better.

Still, the challenge of boarding the Glazed Omen was very considerable for the Flagrant Vandals. The main problem was that the Vandals had to stop and disable any self-destruct mechanisms before the Masters of Combat got wind of their intentions.

Ves knew the capabilities of the Vandals. Their security officers may be able to moonlight as boarders, but casualties would inevitably be high.

A security captain couldn't help but become discolored. "Sir, will our men be needed for an offensive action?"

Verle nodded. "I'm afraid so, but not as the main thrust. Your men will be needed to secure a beachhead upon entry and attract their attention. As long as your boarders can hold their ground and withstand their counterattacks, the Glazed Omen will inevitably fall into our hands."

"If my men aren't the ones responsible for taking control of the flagship, then who will?"

To capture a starship, a boarding force essentially needed to take over two or three critical sections buried deep within the vessel.

"Don't worry about that. We've allied with another force which specializes in boarding actions."

This sudden bombshell came as a huge surprise to the Vandal officers. "Sir, which outfit did we ally with? Can they be trusted?"

Ves hoped the Vandals hadn't gotten in bed with Calabast or her ilk. Fortunately, Major Verle did not mention anything about her. Instead, their ally turned out to be a completely different outfit!

"We've conducted some back channel talks since yesterday, and our goals happened to align. Let me announce to you that Lydia's Swordmaidens will be our ally for the foreseeable future.

Lydia's Swordmaidens! The all-female pirate gang with vague ties to the Reinald Republic!

"They're Reinaldans, are they not? Don't they hate our guts?"

"Not every Reinaldan is the same." Verle explained. "While it's true that we've drawn the ire of the aggressive faction, that has given us a basis for cooperation with their political opponents. The Reinaldan faction that is propping up the Swordmaidens have approached us in good faith. While I'm not at liberty to reveal why we agreed to partner up, you should be aware that this alliance is not a short-lived one. We'll be leaning on each other in an upcoming operation."

Ves predicted something like this. Considering everything that Calabast had revealed to him, the competition for the Starlight Megalodon's encrypted data chips did not rule out any collaborations. As long as the Megalodon's vault contained multiple treatments, a team could always split up the spoils.

Yet of all the possible outfits the Vandals could team up, they settled for a pirate gang of all choices!

Chapter 624 Performance Review

"Sir!" A mech captain called. "Is it wise to ally with Lydia's Swordmaidens? They're anything but innocent maidens. They're a bunch of bloodthirsty alpha females! They make their living by robbing and pillaging other ships!"

Any outfit labelled with the moniker of pirates inevitably carried a rotten reputation. Different from criminal gangs, they often went to further extremes, robbing and killing in the spacelanes without restraint.

In general, the most awful pirate gangs never dared to show up in civilized space, because the MTA routinely hunted them down whenever they revealed their presence.

"That's a valid concern." Major Verle responded calmly. "While the record of Lydia's Swordmaidens isn't spotless, it's not much worse than ours. The Swordmaidens prey upon treasure hunters and neutral starships in the frontier. While it is anything but an honest business, their victims mostly have themselves to blame for entering lawless space."

That mollified the Vandals a bit. There was a difference between pirates that attacked ships and outposts in civilized space and pirates that mixed up in frontier space. Though the line was often blurred between the two, the fact that the Swordmaidens had been allowed to berth in the Harkensen System meant they hadn't crossed the bottom line of the MTA or the Reinald Republic.

The captain remained stubborn, however. "I still think it's a bad idea, sir. People are already talking bad about us. Once we mix up with pirates, we'll be proving them right."

"Who cares about our rep?!" Captain Rosa Orfan retorted. "We've been painted as borderline pirates for decades. While pretending to be heroes for a month feels good, it should hardly matter to us. Deep down, we're scoundrels, and I'm proud of that!"

"Hear hear!"

"Agree!"

The majority of the Vandals happened to agree with her, if only because she commanded the most prestige among the mech captains. Though a lot of Vandals missed the benefits that came with being regarded as heroes, it wasn't as if their current lot was anything different from before.

"The Flagrant Vandals have never taken reputation into account when we decide our actions." Major Verle finally settled the debate. "We follow orders and we fight for the Republic. What other people say about us is ineffectual noise. Talk won't win any wars. Only through battle can we affect a positive change."

Ves had to hand it to the major. The man sounded like a bona fide loyalist of the Republic. Whether he really meant it or not remained to be seen, but for now the Vandal officers didn't appear to be fostering any other thoughts.

"Now, regardless of how bad it may seem like, allying ourselves with Lydia's Swordmaidens will prove crucial in our next major operation, which will likely take place in the frontier. This is their home turf, and they possess some of the most detailed star charts among the local frontier outfits."

The men did not take the news that they would be heading further and further away from the Republic very well.

"What does the frontier have to do with our mission?"

"That's classified. Suffice to say, this will be our last major mission for the foreseeable time. As long as we complete this mission, headquarters has promised us we can take it easy for the remainder of the war."

That set off a storm of speculation. If the Mech Corps delivered their promises, that basically meant that the Flagrant Vandals would not be expected to complete arduous missions or fight any pitched battles. The Vandals loved it if they could spend the rest of the war on cushy missions such as patrolling the rear or garrisoning a sleepy little star system.

Of course, none of the Vandals were fools. The Mech Corps basically ignored them for decades. Why would they be so generous all of a sudden?

The most peculiar part about this briefing was that none of the Vandals showed too much curiosity of what lay ahead. Many of them were accustomed to living by the day. Long-term strategies was not their forte by any means. This happened to make it easier to keep upcoming operations secret.

The only thing the Vandals fixated on was returning home and the promise of being reassigned to the rear. The Vandals truly needed it as they had to replenish their ranks of mech pilots.

The meeting quickly ended after the Vandals got around to the notion of allying with Lydia's Swordmaidens. This would not be an incidental teamup, but a deeper cooperation where both sides fought alongside each other for months.

A few people got called to Major Verle's stateroom, including Ves. He waited patiently as Verle held individual talks with key Vandals such as Captain Orfan. Once Ves received his turn, he entered the stateroom.

The compartment hadn't received any new decorations since his last visit. It reflected their hectic schedule and their inability to rest.

"Mr. Larkinson, take a seat."

Once Ves sat, he waited for the man to speak. Inside, he hoped that the major would finally open up on what they were really aiming for, but realistically this was unlikely to happen.

"How long have you been with us?"

The question threw him off-guard. "More than half a year. It won't be long before I've been with this mech regiment for a year, sir."

"You've witnessed the high points and low points of our participation in this war. You came at exactly the right moment if you were looking for action. To many mech designers, what we've been through is a nightmare. What do you think, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves thought his answer through. While he hadn't asked to be thrown into life-threatening situations, there was a part of him that revelled in the experience. Witnessing mechs in action and being responsible for servicing them was an unforgettable experience that would live with him for the rest of his mech design career.

"I feel blessed for being part of the Flagrant Vandals, sir. It's not what I expected when the Mech Corps called me up, but I never regretted it. As a mech designer, I may not be able to hop into a mech and fight on the battlefield, but this is the next best thing."

The major threw a rare smile at Ves. "Honest. I like it. No platitudes about honor. No half-hearted words about serving the Republic. It's all about you. That's okay, Mr. Larkinson. This is also what the Bright Republic aims to achieve when they push mech designers into the Mech Corps."

"So it's true, then? The Mech Corps really wants to cull their useless mech designers?"

"You make it sound cruder than necessary. This isn't any great secret, but the Bright Republic is not a wealthy state." The man waved his arms around him. "It can only support so many mech designers, whether you're talking about the private sector or the military. We're doing you mech designers a favor by squeezing out your potential. Only through the worst moments of your lives can you discover the greatness within yourselves. The Republic can't afford to support any silk pants mech designer who faints at the sight of blood."

This seemed to be a running theme among organizations that cultivated mech designers. The more Ves learned about how mech designers advanced, the more he agreed with this philosophy. Though their profession stereotypically consisted of nerds, in truth they did not make for great mech designers.

"I hope I've met the expectations the Mech Corps has set upon me, sir." Ves replied.

"That is what I wished to talk about. I've been keeping tabs on you, and so did Colonel Lowenfield and Professor Velten. All three of us are impressed with your contributions up to this date. Although there are some questionable points in your records, they are inconsequential compared to how pivotal you've been for our successes. The ability that you've displayed shouldn't be wasted."

"I hope to continue to be useful to the Vandals, sir."

Verle shook his head. "That's not in the cards for you. I wasn't lying earlier when I said the Vandals will be taken off the frontlines. We've attracted too much heat, and that's bad for a mech regiment like ours. If the frontlines don't collapse, we're likely never going to see much action again. Our next battles will consist of small skirmishes and raids that's beneath your attention."

Ves frowned a bit. The major was building up to something.

"Therefore, we thought it over, and decided it is best to transfer you to another assignment ahead of time. This is a great privilege for a conscripted mech designer such as you. Usually, it takes years of vetting before being sent to your next assignment."

The news of his impending transfer almost floored Ves. Just when he got acclimated to the rambunctious Vandals, the higher ups wanted to send him away.

The major made it sound like this was a reward, but he couldn't help but feel as if they wanted him out.

"As I said, the 6th Flagrant Vandals is thankful for your contributions. This is why we don't wish to bury your talent. There are other mech regiments that are fighting the good fight, and many more units besides that are awfully short on mech designers with your specific set of competences. While I can't reveal anything about your next assignment, I can assure you that many mech designers would kill to be in your place."

"Won't the Mech Corps intervene, sir? Back at the training camp, I performed better than any other Apprentice Mech Designer, but they still sent me to your mech regiment along with all the other untrustworthy folk."

Major Verle turned to his terminal and called up some records. "Hm, I can see why you formed such an impression, but not everything you cooked up in your mind is true. While you make a valid point, who says the Mech Corps isn't trying to kill two birds with a single stone? There is more to your placement with us than lack of trust. In any event, your performance up to date is more than enough to dispel any suspicions. No matter what you say, your reassignment is already set in stone. Understood?"

"Yes.. sir."

Ves truly felt ambivalent about this change. He had really grown on the Flagrant Vandals that he basically couldn't imagine working for a conventional mech regiment. Still, until he received concrete details about his next assignment, he shouldn't make too many assumptions.

"That said, it's not easy for you to obtain this great opportunity. Although you've already performed above our expectations, our mission is not yet at an end." The commanding officer leaned forward and crossed his fingers on his desk. "I'm not referring to our upcoming battle against the Masters of

Combat. What I'm truly concerned about is the challenges we will face in our next operation in the frontier. Our mechs will be facing extreme conditions further away from Republic space than you can ever imagine. Your aid is indispensable to what we have in store."

Ah. He knew there was a catch. Major Verle never praised someone without an ulterior motive. The so-called great opportunity turned out to be a carrot that was meant to motivate Ves to perform his duties at his best.

"I will endeavor to keep our mechs in tip-top shape, major." He said. "Is this related to the batch of heavy-duty gravitic backpacks we recently procured?"

Right now, all of that heavy equipment took up valuable storage space in their starships. Ves was a little peeved at all of the deadweight.

"It is. I would prefer it if you prep our landbound mechs to deploy on Super Earth-like environments. I understand that normal mechs won't be able to endure the crushing gravity of such an environment without preparation."

Ves nodded. "That's correct, sir. It depends on the quality and design intentions of the mech designer, but most landbound mechs are optimized for standard gravity. Even the mechs that are advertised as tough may only be able to endure crushing force over very short intervals. They have no problem facing ten g's of force in a span of a couple of seconds, but withstanding five g's of gravity for a day will certainly degrade the most delicate components inside the machines."

He could already tell their current complement of landbound mechs wouldn't be able to last on a Super Earth even with the help of the gravitic backpacks. The mech technicians had a lot of work ahead of themselves to change this outcome, and this inevitably required his full attention.

No wonder the major treated Ves in such a friendly manner. Ves was the only mech designer in the Verle Task Force who could save them from their impending doom.

Chapter 625 Emotional Swings

Ves mulled over the implications of his recent meeting with Major Verle. The man never issued orders without purpose. His leadership style leaned towards motivating his subordinates to take a desired course of action out of their own free will.

The mech officer was so adept at saying the right things that Ves took a lot of notes. However, his observations also made him aware when he was on the receiving end of this method.

"The problem is that I don't even know if I want to pursue this great opportunity." He muttered.

Certainly, Ves had no reason to doubt Major Verle's credibility, but the mech officer's tendency to keep his secrets close to his chest was infuriating. Countless possibilities tantalized in front of Ves, yet couldn't it have hurt to receive a hint or two?!

The news that he might get separated from the Vandals put him in a depressed mood. Verle's arguments made sense, but Ves couldn't help but feel as if the Vandals didn't want him anymore.

"That's not true." He shook his head. His logic reasserted itself. "I've worked hard enough to earn everyone's appreciation. There's no way they'd willingly let me go. It might be due to another reason."

Verle reminded him that he had made some faulty assumptions based on incomplete information. Ves had a habit of overthinking his extrapolations of the future based on guesswork and scraps of information. He couldn't help it as his imagination went hyperactive sometimes.

"All of this comes down due to my inability to control myself."

He was far from the ideal of an enlightened man. Deep down, he was still being ruled by his emotions, desires and instincts. "This is what it means to be human."

Ves suspected that his physical and genetic changes exacerbated his moments of irrationality. He felt peeved whenever he lost control without realizing it. Just this moment where he preferred to stick with a dead-end mech regiment like the Flagrant Vandals had been another example of his emotions ruling over his logic.

The Flagrant Vandals was one of the saddest and most decrepit mech regiments of the Mech Corps. They could barely maintain the development of just three inhouse mech models. They employed only a single Senior Mech Designer and two Journeyman Mech Designers to helm their design teams. Compared to what Ves initially dreamt about, every aspect about the Vandals turned out to be a disappointment.

Yet sentiment had a way of sticking around despite his efforts to push it aside. He'd grown on the Vandals, and almost considered himself as one of their own.

Despite their deficiencies, Ves had grown to love the casual atmosphere and freewheeling internal culture. Nobody acted too stiff and the Vandals maintained just enough discipline without turning into massive jerks. He could act more freely here than in any other military setting. The lack of talented mech designers also provided Ves an opportunity to take on greater responsibilities.

He'll certainly miss that last part. Ves had grown to like being in charge. Though he still had to keep Professor Velten apprised of his decisions, the

distant Senior Mech Designer generally refrained from meddling in the way he executed his authority.

After a while, he pushed his concerns from his mind and decided to focus on the immediate future. Any hopes and fears about his next assignment had to wait until he completed his current one with the Vandals.

Once he returned to his office, he discovered something new. The moment he logged into his terminal, he discovered that he inexplicably gained greater access to the central database. His security clearance received another bump, allowing him to access more detailed classified design schematics and giving him the right to study another batch of exclusive textbooks.

Perhaps any other mech designer might have become ecstatic about this level of access by now, but Ves hardly felt roused. After his recent insight on how much he obsessed over hoarding technical knowledge, Ves became aware that studying new theories without purpose wouldn't make him a better mech designer.

The increased access to the internal database had become a hollow reward for him. The only pieces of knowledge that Ves figured would be worthwhile for him to read up on was to learn how to harden mechs against heavy gravity and how to develop countermeasures against stealth.

"Right now, the Vandals are about to force a battle against a Venidsan mercenary corps. Even though they shouldn't have access to stealth technology, the records did mention that they are buddies with Venidse's mech legions. It's not out of the question that they are holding back their stealth capabilities as a trump card."

The more he thought about it, the more his paranoia surged. Perhaps his recent bad experiences with stealth left him with some trauma, but Ves simply

couldn't shake off the fear that the Masters of Combat had the ability to turn the tide of the battle.

Ves recognized that this was another instance where his emotions dominated over his logic, but the two did not have to be in opposition this time.

"Encountering stealth technology is a low-probably event, but that doesn't mean it makes sense to discount the possibility."

One ought to hope for the best but prepare for the worst.

He decided to brush up on his knowledge in this field and make some preparations to counter any instances of stealth.

"First, I've got to draft another schedule."

Four weeks of rest and recuperation at the Harkensen System had done a lot of good to their ships and mechs. The Shield of Hispania looked much more robust than before, and even received some upgrades.

As for their compliment of mechs, both their spaceborn and landbound mechs regained their strength. Though the repair businesses tried to cut as many corners as possible, they looked a lot better than before.

Ves drew up a schedule for the coming weeks. He based his planning around two priorities. First, the Vandals needed to ready their spaceborn mechs for immediate combat against the Masters of Combat. The Vesian mercenary corps might not be able to match the Vandals in battle, but they were tough as hell and wouldn't succumb without a fight.

"We'll have to upgrade the sensors from a number of Inheritor mechs as well."

After that, the mech technicians needed to put most of their focus on strengthening the internals of their landbound mechs. Certain processors and other delicate components needed to be replaced by more robust variants that could withstand the continued abuse of high-gravity environments.

"We also need to configure the heavy-duty gravitic backpacks to the landbound mechs. Relying on the default settings won't be not enough."

A gravitic backpack basically exerted an oval-shaped antigrav field around the frame of the mech. It counteracted the crushing gravity at the cost of gobbling up lots of power.

"The power issue will be the biggest issue by far."

A Super Earth with an average gravity of five g's required at least three g's of antigrav force to restore a semblance of mobility to a mech. Anything less than that slowed the mech to a crawl.

Ves performed some quick and dirty calculations. The results didn't appear to be optimistic. "The landbound mechs at our disposal are battle-focused. If the mechs have been optimized for enduring extreme environments, then they don't require as much hand holding."

The internal batteries of the heavy-duty gravitic backpacks drained themselves within an hour at their highest settings!

"This backpack model isn't a cheap knockoff. It's a quality product!"

Yet even then, the batteries drained too fast. The only saving grace was that the backpacks could connect to a mech's internal power supply via the standardized power ports that conformed to the Vesian Modular Fitting Standard.

"No matter how many Vesian landbound mech models the Vandals make use of, every single one of them shares the same MFS. I don't need to wrack my heads over making the gravitic backpacks compatible to their mechs."

This saved him a lot of time and effort. The most he had to do was to tweak the output of the gravitic backpacks to match the dimensions of the mechs as closely as possible.

A provisional schedule came into being. While Ves had never received a timeframe of the next operation, it took a while to reach the frontier from Reinald space. He therefore worked around the assumption that it took two months to cross over to the frontier and travel deep enough to stumble upon the trail of the Starlight Megalodon.

"Two months will have to do."

Strengthening the internals of a mech was a tedious job at best. It involved disassembling every mech without damaging anything in order to reach the most delicate components that needed to be changed.

"Close to three-hundred landbound mechs will require these tweaks. That's too much."

Still, Ves had no choice but to set this schedule. He needed to lean on the mech designers and chief technicians to find ways of cutting down the time to treat each mech.

Once he double-checked the schedule, he sent the files to Major Verle for approval. He received it within an hour. The major approved his plans without any comment, which meant that Ves hadn't screwed up or overlooked anything important.

"It also means he trusts my judgement."

Ves didn't dwell on the fast response. He split up the schedule into different work assignments for every mech designer and every shift of mech technicians before sending them onwards. His deputies would ensure the recipients actually stuck to them. If not, Ves would gain an excuse to punish Mercator and Trozin.

"Hmph, those two are hardly worth my time, especially if I'm on my way out."

If the Vandals hadn't been flinging themselves from crisis to crisis, the two careerist mech designers might have been able to stir up more trouble. So far, they had no means of competing directly against Ves, and it looked as if they would never get the opportunity to gain the upper hand.

Now that Ves knew he was on his way out, his concerns over the two Apprentices seem trivial. Though Ves admitted that they possessed some competence, they still had years ahead of them before they could move to brighter pastures.

One of the more peculiar traits about the Flagrant Vandals was that it exhibited a high amount of transfers. While many would come to settle in this mech regiment for the rest of their careers, others only stuck around for a couple of years before being transferred elsewhere. Ves had attempted to look up where they went, but Ves did not possess the right privileges to access that data even after his security clearance improved.

Ves wondered whether the opportunity Verle hinted at had always been the original plan. Even if Ves hadn't stood out with his performance, his futureeeee was already set in stone. The most he accomplished was to bring his transfer date forward.

"I wonder though if my abilities are truly needed there."

Though Ves still longed for a plum assignment, he would certainly be working under more capable mech designers. This meant he would go back to doing grunt work with almost no autonomy to speak of. How could he flex his design ability and refine his mastery over his Skills if he needed to stick to a narrow set of instructions?

Another thing Ves was worried about was that he needed to start all over again when it came to building relationships. Though Ves hadn't cultivated any close friends among the Vandals, he formed many ties that might be

useful after the war. Still, his work was only half-done. Ves had not reach the point where the Vandals would willingly come and work for the LMC or the Avatars of Myth if the Mech Corps let them go.

Compared to hiring random mercenaries from the job market, hiring known individuals with a shared history of struggle and survival appealed Ves the most. There was a sense of instinctive trust and brotherhood among the Vandals.

This bond had reached the point where Ves trusted them with his life.

Chapter 626 Players of the Game

The Verle Task Force was about to reach the Remoss System in one more day. The Remoss System was a popular stopover point for treasure hunters and pirates traveling back and forth between the frontier and the Harkensen System.

The Remoss System offered nothing interesting to any visitors. With a big neighbor like the Harkensen System, it lacked the ability to offer anything worthwhile to tourists and outfits. Its domestic industries was rather anemic as they were forced to produce low-value bulk goods that sold for a pittance in Harkensen.

While Remoss didn't station any garrison forces in the outer system, they nonetheless maintained a small but capable defense fleet.

Since the upcoming battle would likely take place in the outer system, the local defenders likely wouldn't intervene. Though the relationship between the Reinald Republic and the Flagrant Vandals had soured, it shouldn't have come to the point of provoking them into action.

"Even if the local garrison is compelled to act, they're too weak to challenge the Vandals."

He focused most of his attention on preparing the Vandal spaceborn mechs for battle. He first read up on the Masters of Combat in order to see whether he missed something crucial.

The Masters of Combat turned out to be a few decades old, the same as the Flagrant Vandals. That was sufficient for them to develop their own unique culture and mech tradition, but not to the point where they had reached the ranks of the elites.

"Battling them won't result in a repeat of the battle against the Frosty Meteors."

Ves recalled the desperate circumstances of that fight. Though the Frosty Meteors only managed to intercept the Verle Task Force with three or four companies of spaceborn mechs, they practically halved the Vandal mech roster with their near-unyielding charge.

He scratched his chin while he processed the extra data. "The Masters of Combat excel on land, so we definitely have to catch them before their mechs make landfall. This is a rare opportunity to take out one of our competitors before they become ten times harder to dislodge."

He could already imagine the horror of trying to stem the tide of Vesian mechs on the surface of the Super Earth. In such an extreme environment where their power-hungry gravitic backpacks formed their only means of succor, the best asset was experience.

"It makes sense to force the Masters of Combat off the board. If they're one of the participants of the game, their prowess on land is too scary to contemplate."

This also explained why the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens went to bed with each other. Though the two had little in common, it also

meant their interests didn't collide. Besides chasing after the same prize, they had little else to fight over.

"I wonder what Lydia's Swordmaidens are good at. They sound like they're a bunch of melee maniacs."

Diving into the records revealed sparse details. Because they operated entirely in the frontier, detailed records was hard to come by. Nonetheless, Ves stitched together various scraps of intelligence and formed a decent impression of their fighting style.

He snorted at the result. "They're a bunch of robbers!"

Just like any other pirate outfit, the Swordmaidens earned their living by robbing others. The main distinction with the Swordmaidens was that rather than intercepting fleets in transit in space, they favored attacking ongoing expeditions on land!

This required a lot more effort than sitting in wait at the edge of a random star system. Pirates generally lay in ambush near popular transit points. In practice, the huge distances involved and the inherent lack of precision of FTL technology made ambushing fleets in space exceptionally hard.

If the incoming fleet of ships ended up several light-hours away from the ambushers, the pirates would never be able to close the distance in time. Even if the pirates predicted the route and vector of their targets, they still let too many victims slip from their grasp.

The pirates couldn't help it. Space was simply too big.

Compared to ambushing fleets in space, ambushing an expedition that was chained to the ground was a lot easier. The Swordmaidens knew where they could find their targets, and as long as they enjoyed orbital superiority, they could drop as much mechs as necessary to subdue the forces on the ground.

The only challenge with this method was that Lydia's Swordmaidens depended upon tip offs and their own intelligence gathering efforts to sniff out juicy treasure hunting expeditions.

"Still, it seems they've become quite good at it over the years."

This meant that the Swordmaidens had become very formidable in this aspect. They had fully taken root in the lawless society of frontier space.

Maybe the Flagrant Vandals could easily demolish the Swordmaidens in civilized space. Yet if the battle took place in the frontier, the Swordmaidens would easily be able to gain the upper hand through various means.

In general, their focus on robbing treasure hunters had turned them into formidable landbound combatants. As their name suggested, they highly favored swordsman mechs. This mech archetype offered a flexible balance between mobility and protection under challenging environments. The best part about swordsman mechs was that they offered a high amount of offensive power that enabled them to overwhelm guard mechs in the flashiest manner possible.

Most treasure hunting expeditions surrendered on the spot at that point.

As a gang of robbers, the conduct of the Swordmaidens turned out to be rather mild. They never killed the treasure hunters after they surrendered and never demolished their means of escape.

Crueler pirates either slaughtered or enslaved every single captive. If they were lazy enough to do so, they could still drive the expedition members to despair by stealing their mechs and ships. With no way out of the wild and untamed planet, they lost every hope of returning to civilized space!

In fact, the frontier wasn't made up a vast stretch of unpopulated or alien-occupied star systems. A small but critical portion of planets hosted humans that had gone native over the years. Either willingly or not, they managed to

persevere where others had fallen and erected functional, self-sufficient settlements, some of which turned into fiefs for the brutal pirate gangs that held sway in those regions of space.

"Compared to those hardcore pirates, the conduct of Lydia's Swordmaidens is positively angelic."

The Swordmaidens only attacked targets they knew for certain they could overwhelm. They picked their targets wisely and backed off from any threats beyond their means to defeat. Over time, they steadily grew their numbers from a collection of women to a formidable outfit that became a mainstay in the frontier.

"Still, even if they're admirable for being able to survive in the frontier, they're similar to the Flagrant Vandals. They prey on the weak and run from the strong. They won't do well against a battle-oriented mech outfit."

When Ves compared their mech doctrines and battle records to those of the Masters of Combat, the Swordmaidens had no chance of winning. It couldn't be helped. The Masters of Combat always deployed a balanced force of defense-oriented mechs. Each mech model and mech type rounded out each other's weaknesses.

The Swordmaidens on the other hand deployed a disproportionate amount of swordsman mechs. Although a small number of Swordmaidens piloted knights or ranged mechs, this uneven mech roster basically forced them into a singular strategy.

"Attack! Attack! Attack!"

This also happened to be strategy the Masters of Combat excelled in dealing with. They loved to foil the advances of their opponents, blunting their offensives and tiring them out until the Masters of Combat could deliver the coup-de-grace.

In this perspective, taking the Masters of Combat out of play before they reached the Starlight Megalodon made more and more sense.

From a greater perspective, the alliance between the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens reeked of desperation. Alone, they lacked the strength to compete against other outfits. Only after combining their forces did they gain the necessary footing to win the game.

Maybe the Vandals would be able to muscle out the other outfit if they brought their full numbers. However, the Verle Task Force alone was unable to deter their competitors, especially when they never had the opportunity to replenish their fallen mech pilots.

"It's unfortunate that they're both raiding outfits."

However, this had given both of them the grounds for cooperation. Neither of them were strong enough to succeed without each other's help. Only by marrying their strength would they be able to contend in this brutal game.

Relevant to the upcoming battle, just because the Swordmaidens didn't focus on spaceborn combat didn't mean they neglected it entirely. Without adequate spaceborn forces, they wouldn't have been able to wrestle orbital superiority from the expeditionary fleets.

Their spaceborn battle capabilities didn't seem exceptional, but different from the Vandals, the Swordmaidens cultivated a strong and formidable boarding force. Just because they didn't strangle the lifeline of their victims didn't mean they disregarded the value of starships. A capable boarding force was necessary to take over high-value starships without risking any shenanigans.

The Swordmaidens earned as much money from selling their prize ships to selling the expedition's spoils. The only ships they left behind were low-value rust buckets such as old cargo haulers or decrepit converted carriers.

It still seemed rather strange to Ves that Lydia's Swordmaidens expressly cultivated an elite boarding force while slightly neglecting their spaceborn mechs. It sounded incongruent to their strategy.

After all, it took a lot more effort to capture a ship intact than to blow it out of the skies.

Ves shrugged. "Oh well. We'll soon come into contact with each other, so I'll probably find out the truth behind the matter."

He couldn't forget that Lydia's Swordmaidens possessed a backer. Ves hadn't been able to dig up any accurate information about the power behind the scenes besides the fact that they were a part of a more moderate faction.

Reinaldan politics was rather polarizing. One faction sought to expand their influence in the Komodo Star Sector, and they weren't above using force. They wanted to push the Frozen Leaf Alliance from a defensive alliance into a greater union that would allow them to push their weight around.

The other faction advocated for maintaining the status quo. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. This was pretty much the essence of their motto. They liked the fact the Reinald Republic had grown into an unofficial trade hub that carved out its own niche.

Not everyone from the military fell into the aggressive camp. Neither did every merchant believe the Reinald Republic would be able to remain safe.

Lydia's Swordmaidens was a tool that extended the reach of the moderate faction to the frontier. If worst came to worst, the Swordmaidens could also lead their backers beyond the reach of their enemies if the Reinald Republic ever fell.

In this context, Lydia's Swordmaidens were less like pirates and more like intelligence assets that pretended to be pirates. Perhaps their budget was

truly dependent on their spoils, but Ves figured that there was definitely more the Swordmaidens than what the shallow records had revealed.

Almost every outfit involved in this game had a backer propping them up. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been so desperate to obtain the life-prolonging doses.

If not for themselves, why compete for it in the first place? This property was far too hot to be sold to someone else.

From what Ves could gather up to now, there were at least four players in the game.

One had to be a senior official from the Bright Republic. That person wielded enough power to direct the Flagrant Vandals.

The player behind the Masters of Combat had to be a Vesian, though not necessarily a Venidsan.

The player depending on Lydia's Swordmaidens had to be a part of the moderate faction of the Reinald Republic.

The identity of the fourth player was the most mysterious. This individual had ties to the terrorists who turned Harkensen I into a hellhole. This was the most thorny player of all, because he displayed the least scruples of all.

Chapter 627 Pirate Empires II

Chief Technician Haine, Chief Engineer Avanaeon and Lieutenant Commander Soapstone gathered at their usual haunt, though they hardly managed to squeeze the time. The impending call for battle meant that every Vandal had to needed to make the most out of the few hours that remained.

Ves was at the makeshift lounge as well. The foursome played their usual game of Pirate Empires. The semi-virtual board game spiced up the growth of their four chosen outfits with lifelike miniature graphics and a melodramatic music score.

Chief Haine directed her usual choice of pirates. Chief Engineer Avanaeon went with his familiar band of elite mercenaries, while Soapstone switched up her game by opting for pirates as well.

Unlike Haine, who relied on snowballing her pirate gang through making use of her charisma, Soapstone opted to make external alliances with rivaling pirate gangs. The logistics officer's strategy was novel, but worked out well enough because she mitigated the backstabbing nature of pirate gangs by entangling them with material benefits.

The contrast between their pirate gangs couldn't be more different. While Haine essentially developed a cult of personality around her pirate commander identity, Soapstone faded into the background and became the hidden shadow behind a coalition of pirate gangs.

The two players competed directly against each other, and the conflicts between them became so heated that Ves and Avanaeon farmed the rest of the map in peace.

As for Ves, he mixed it up as well. He tried out an outfit only available from an expansion.

"I hate to break it to you two gals, but the head designer is running out of control! In twenty turns, he's about to topple the rulers of an entire province!" Avanaeon warned.

Haine and Soapstone diverted their attention from their catfight. Ves had been laying low all this time, spending most of his time by raiding factories for mechs and gear while training up the volunteers who wanted to fight for the cause. All of it looked boring in comparison to the high-profile moves of his fellow players, but once he brought everything together with his most recent moves, his true strength couldn't be hidden any longer.

Haine sputtered as she swigged a drink. "Damn it, Ves, rebel movements are broken as hell in this game! I have to work my butt off to recruit new pirates, while you only need to sit back and rake in the suckers who bought into your stupid cause!"

Ves laughed as his plan came together. "I can't help it if the government is run by a bunch of nincompoops. They're not flexible enough to keep up with my changes."

Pirate Empires was a board game that modeled after the management of various outfits and groups in the frontier. It allowed average people to roleplay as someone with power at their fingertips. Though the gameplay was nothing like the real thing, Ves nonetheless found it useful to experience the mindset of different outfit commanders.

Playing as a rebel movement mostly meant Ves played on a different field than the other players. The goal of a rebel movement was to wrest control over the province. Achieving this difficult objective would put all of the province's military mechs at his disposal.

Even if the game limited the amount of mechs that could be reassigned from garrison duties, the forces would be enough to crush any player. Only the best players with endgame-level ships and mechs stood a chance of surviving such an onslaught.

"Getting there will be difficult, though."

Rebel movements started small and pathetic. With untrained fanatics as footsoldiers and only a single wad of cash as starting funds, rebel commanders needed to build up their movements step by step. Each raid not only had to inspire the local citizens, but also turn a profit.

During this endless struggle to acquire more funding and manpower, the provincial government wasn't sleeping. The larger the rebel movement grew,

the more pushback it received from the government. Crack anti-terrorist units constantly sniffed out his cells and confiscated his supply caches. Trying to survive under this constant hounding meant that Ves had to learn to be adept at risk management.

He was going to lose men, equipment and funding regardless. What he needed to do was to keep the rebel movement growing so that it could easily sustain the losses.

Both the gains and losses was subject to chance.

Perhaps everything went perfect in one match. The anti-terrorist forces only managed to destroy some inconsequential cells while the rebel movement succeeded in taking down facility after facility.

His luck might turn out to be awful in the next match. His key cells were being hunted down one after another while his raids bumped into stiff opposition. Traitors emerged among his ranks and sold out the positions of his supply caches, or worse, split off into a splinter movement that competed directly against their parent movement!

The intervention of a rival player could easily tip the balance against his favor. For example, Avanaeon's elite mercenary corps built up a formidable force based around excellent carriers and a small but high-quality company of mechs. The mercenary corps could easily accept a contract to hunt down the spaceborn assets of the rebel movement.

Without ships, the rebel cells couldn't reinforce each other. Neither would Ves be able to trade his gains for additional funding and gear.

Too bad it was too late now. Ves had quietly overcome the weakest period of any rebel movement. His force now numbered hundreds of spaceborn and landbound mechs. Though currently his mechs were spread throughout more

than a dozen different cells, once he gathered them into a cohesive force, he gained the ability to contend for the provincial capital!

"Tch!" Soapstone spat. "My pirate coalition has gained too much infamy. The border patrol will shoot my pirates down if I send them into civilized space."

Chief Haine's pirates suffered from the same problem. Neither of them had taken the route of Lydia's Swordmaidens. With not a single backer from civilized space to vouch for their good conduct, it was virtually certain that they would be hunted down by military mech regiments or several mercenary corps on contract.

Only Avaneon's mercenaries possessed the opportunity to halt Ves' momentum, but he was busy on a long-term contract himself. This was why he called Ves out. If Avaneon broke off his current mission, his mercenary corps would have received a black mark.

To any mercenary corps, a black mark on their record meant an end to lucrative missions. This would certainly stall the growth of Avaneon's forces, putting him out of contention by the time the match progressed to the endgame.

So in short, none of his rival players interfered as Ves called for his rebel movement to begin their uprising!

As everyone did their own thing, Ves began to ask a question, partially to distract the other players but also because this might be the only time he could get an answer.

"Does everyone know about what's in store for the Vandals after we complete our mission at the frontier?"

Everyone nodded. "According to the boss, we'll be sent to the rear. The days of pitched battles and high-risk operations will soon be over for us!"

"I wouldn't be so reassured if I were you, Haine." Soapstone cautioned. "If the stalemate at the frontline tips in Vesia's favor, headquarters won't hesitate to break their promise. They're going to need mechs at the front, and they won't care about their own guarantees."

The words of warning highlighted the unpredictable nature of war. Many times, the Vesians succeeded in punching through the defensive lines of the Bright Republic. This allowed them to advance to the interior of Republic space. Once they got into striking distance of Bentheim, the Mech Corps really started panicking and would pull out all the stops.

Ves followed up this thread with his real question. "Verle informed me that I might be reassigned at that point. Something about my talents being wasted in a rearguard unit. The only thing that's nagging me is that he's being too coy about it. He simply won't say where they'll station me next. Can any of you help me out?"

The logistics officer and the two chiefs looked at each other. The familiar behavior indicated to Ves that they weren't ignorant about the matter.

Eventually, the chief engineer spoke up. "I think we have a good idea where you are heading next. The problem is that they're rather prissy about confidentiality. They won't like it if they find out that we spilled the beans."

After that, they all shut their mouths like clamps. No matter how much Ves attempted to pry open their mouths, they took their duties seriously. This was too large of a secret for them to casually leak, even to a known friend like Ves.

"Alright, I get it." He sighed and gave up. He turned to another matter. "What do you think about hitting the Masters of Combat?"

"I don't like it." Chief Haine responded. "Sure, they're Vesians, but the major wants to hit them after we've taken only a single step away from the

Harkensen System. That's practically taunting the Reinaldans in front of their doorstep!"

Chief Avanaeon agreed with the chief technician. "The Masters of Combat aren't pushovers. While it's true that we can crush them if we combine our forces with Lydia's Swordmaidens, can those witches be trusted? They're pirates, after all. Who's to say they aren't already in bed with the Masters of Combat, and are just waiting for us to walk into their trap?"

"Lydia's Swordmaidens don't have many betrayals on their record." Ves added. "While they aren't the most trustworthy bunch, I don't think they're willing to double-cross a military mech regiment."

He had read through their history, and while the records were very spotty, they had a history of cultivating long-term relationships. They couldn't have survived so long in the frontier without befriending some of the locals.

Lieutenant Commander Soapstone added in her own thoughts. "The Masters of Combat will get in our way sooner or later. They need to be wiped out regardless of what everybody thinks."

Out of everyone in the lounge, Ves knew for certain that Soapstone was a part of the inner circle. Only she knew for sure why her superior insisted on attacking the Venidsan mercenary corps.

"Even then, I can't imagine why Lydia's Swordmaidens are joining in." Chief Haine scratched her head. "As far as I know, they don't have any grudges with the Masters of Combat. While their gear is fairly expensive, they can earn more if they do their usual schtick of robbing treasure hunting expeditions."

Nobody could explain this questionable point. Nobody except Soapstone, the only insider among their gathering. "Lydia's Swordmaidens are serious about this alliance, and so are we. Our cooperation is quite extensive. They've already passed along critical information about the frontier to us. Without this

intel, our task force could have easily blundered into a pirate stronghold or a sandman settlement.

The frontier was home to many dangers. While most pirates roamed the frontier independently, the most threatening ones reached a scale that wasn't any weaker than a small third-rate state like the Reinald Republic.

The alien sandmen formed another major threat to human intrusion. These silicate-based lifeforms were a pain to fight against. The worst part about them was that almost nobody earned a profit by fighting the sandmen. When their sand constructs blew apart, all they left were worthless sand particles.

"Have we secured any guarantees from the pirates that they won't betray us once we're out of civilized space?" Ves probed.

"No, but we don't need to. They need us just as much as we need them. All will be made clear in the future."

Ves heard what he wanted. He received another clue that matched with his guesses. He quietly sighed to himself and looked at the game projected by the table. The senior officials backing the outfits aiming to retrieve the life-prolonging medicines must have been playing their own version of Pirate Empires.

Instead of playing with virtual lives, they played with actual human lives.

Chapter 628 Unorthodox

The Vandal fleet emerged at the edge of the Remoss System in a flash. FTL transitions couldn't be hidden because the entries rippled through gravitic space.

"Pulse the surrounding space." Major Verle ordered with force. "Launch patrol mechs and secure the perimeter. If there's anything hiding nearby, I want to find it out yesterday!"

"Yes, sir!"

The officer in charge of sensors implemented a pre-planned arrangement. As the starships of the task force recovered from their stint in FTL travel, a large number of Inheritors launched from their hangar bays.

Some of them hadn't been worked on since the Vandals got them back from the repair businesses. The mech technicians only had time to upgrade the sensor arrays of only a handful of Inheritors.

Still, this small change was more than enough to make a difference.

"We've detected a cold sensor pod several light-seconds in-system!"

"Shoot it down!"

"Sir, considering its position, the sensor pod likely belongs to the local garrison fleet."

"Shoot it down regardless." Major Verle repeated, throwing a menacing glare at the sensor officer for doubting him. "The Reinaldians are as dirty as anyone. I don't want anyone receiving up-to-date telemetry on our movements."

A precise laser took out the distant sensor pod. Though it was challenging to destroy something so far away when it moved, the sensor pod possessed no mobility at all. It was as immobile as a floating piece of rock orbiting around the sun, so its trajectory was a cinch to predict.

A few more seconds went by as the sensors of the ships and mechs started to resolve the vicinity in an expanding range.

"We've detected several unknown fleets! One has been identified as the Masters of Combat! The other is broadcasting their identity as Lydia's Swordmaidens. The third fleet claims to belong to the Caged!"

They expected the first two fleets. They did not expect the presence of the Caged!

"That Roppongan gang!" Verle shouted as he slammed his fist against his armrest. "Tactical, analyze their movements. Tell me why they are here!"

When the various outfits involved in assaulting the spaceport departed from the Harkensen System, they supposedly split in every direction. Now, four of the outfits involved had coincidentally ended up in the Remoss System!

Worse, because they all jumped from the same starting point and emerged at the same exit point, every fleet was a stone's throw away from each other. While that still amounted to countless kilometers in absolute terms, it only took a couple of hours to close the distance, and that was if one fleet tried their best to run away.

Ves watched on from his observation seat in the command center. The amount of aid he could offer at this point was limited, but the preparations he drafted beforehand had already shown their fruits. At this point, his analyses of the enemy mechs would be of limited use, since the Masters of Combat had a tendency to employ high-quality mechs with all-encompassing defenses.

Mech designers and mech technicians contributed as much to a battle as mech pilots. The former two made a difference before the battle even started. The latter contributed to victory once the fighting commenced.

Therefore, even if his presence wasn't entirely useful, Ves still earned the right to witness the battle from the command center.

Still, the presence of the Caged might change all of that. While the Vandals had done their homework on the Masters of Combat, they couldn't say the same for the Caged. Ves immediately pulled up every scrap of readily available intelligence on the gang.

The limited number of reports in the central database depicted them as a major criminal influence in the Roppo Principality. The governments of Roppo

and Reinald maintained close ties to each other because they were both part of the Frozen Leaf Alliance. However, the same could not be said of their criminal elements.

In general, Reinald's gangs held a lot of sway in the surrounding region. The massive amount of commerce and trade in Reinald had empowered the gangs and pirates overseeing the underground markets. This turned them into bullies who weren't afraid to throw their weight around.

This little fact immediately explained why the Roppongan fleet adopted a defensive position against the Reinald-backed Swordmaidens. The pair's backers might have been allies in public, but their outfits were definitely rivals.

The communications officer spoke up. "Commander Lydia is hailing our ship! Do you wish to accept her comm request, sir?"

Major Verle sighed. "Accept her hail but put it on my console. I'll be taking this call in private."

A privacy screen emerged around the major's command chair. Nobody could eavesdrop on their conversation unless they brought a high-tech listening device.

Ves really wanted to hear what the two commanders had to say to each other. Obviously, they hadn't expected the Caged to tag along.

He dove back into the archives and tried to figure out what their mech doctrine looked like. As a gang that held a lot of territory in the Principality, they put more emphasis on their landbound mechs than their spaceborn mechs. However, they hadn't neglected the latter to a great extent.

Whereas the Masters of Combat went all-in on beefy armored mechs, the Roppongans opted to base their spaceborn mech doctrine around the concept of hit-and-run. They employed large numbers of long and medium-ranged

mechs that might not be very tough, but could always be counted upon to move quickly in space.

"Looking at it another way, the Masters of Combat have imitated Venidse's mech doctrine, while the Caged have taken a page off Klein's mech doctrine."

The Klein Duchy's cowardly mech legions may have been a laughing stock in the Kingdom, they were still hell to fight against in certain situations. Lydia's Swordmaidens, the Flagrant Vandals' erstwhile allies, invested most of their resources into fielding melee mechs.

Even an idiot could tell that throwing melee mechs against a prepared force of ranged mechs was a bad idea. The Swordmaidens risked losing at least half their mechs before their first swordsman mechs managed to close in. Worst of all, the Caged had gained a lot of experience in kiting around their enemies in circles.

The fighting style refined by the Caged was an anathema to the honor-obsessed Roppongans. Many Roppongan elites dedicated their training to perfecting their ability to wield mech-sized melee weapons. Among these armaments, mastering the sword was the perennial favorite.

This meant that the Caged possessed a lot of experience in countering swordsman mechs. As a criminal gang with a lot of contradictions with rival Roppongans, it was practically mandatory for them to develop means to cope against melee mechs. As much of their members were made up of Roppongans who rebelled against the stifling society of their state, they took up ranged mechs without any hesitation.

Ves frowned a bit. "The Masters of Combat's mech doctrine counters the mech doctrine of the Flagrant Vandals. The usual fighting style of Lydia's Swordmaidens won't work against the methods of the Caged."

This was an awful situation to be in. Ves had experienced the consequences of a poor matchup several times. Just thinking about the battle against several mech companies of the Frosty Meteors had shown how costly such a battle could play out for the disadvantaged side.

"We can only count on other advantages if we want to win."

After a brief period of time, Major Verle finished his little talk with Commander Lydia. The projection of the female pirate commander swept her view throughout the Shield of Hispania's entire command center before winking out.

"Commander Lydia has informed me that the Caged are 'old friends' with her Swordmaidens." He informed the crew. "While neither of us have received any indication that the Caged have come an understanding with the Masters of Combat, we should assume the worst. Unless directed otherwise, we will treat the fleet from the Caged as hostiles."

On the central plot of the local space, the icons depicting the ships from the Caged took on an ominous red shade.

Right now, the random spread after emerging out of FTL had flung every fleet at least an hour away from each other. None of the fleets were close enough to each other to launch a surprise attack. If any fleet held any hostile intentions, they first needed to move closer to their targets. Anyone could see the attack with hours to spare.

"Sir, our sensors have detected movement from the Masters of Combat and the Caged! They are converging upon each other while widening the distance from us and the Swordsmaiden fleet!"

It would take hours to catch up to a fleeing opponents, but it took much less time for two fleets to meet each other! The Vandals and the Swordmaidens could never stop their enemies from teaming up in time!

Major Verle was already resigned to this outcome. "Please inform Captain Rakeshir to get our butts moving as well. Since the Masters of Combat and the Caged have decided to combine their forces, let us do the same with the Swordmaidens. We can make our next moves from there."

The Shield of Hispania and the other ships of the Vandals rumbled as their thrusters came to life. They made their best speed over to the ships of the Swordmaidens. This wouldn't take too much time.

Right now, the balance of power had tipped towards their opponents. The Flagrant Vandals initially traveled to the Remoss System in order to catch up to the Masters of Combat. They dragged in Lydia's Swordmaidens to guarantee a victory, only to see their advantage evaporate now that the Masters of Combat had called up a buddy as well.

"Mr. Larkinson, I trust you have studied the force composition of the Caged. Tell me what we are facing and explain the odds of winning against the combined hostile force."

Ves took a moment to gather up his answer. He didn't spend nearly enough time on figuring out what made the Caged tick, but right now they weren't exactly swimming in time.

"The Caged fight like the Klein mech legions. They predominantly field swift and agile ranged mechs that can take out their opponents from a distance. This goes for both their spaceborn and landbound mech contingent, captain."

He quickly explained the background behind this development, making it clear that the Caged did not fight like an orthodox Roppongan mech outfit. Many Vandals needed to wrap their minds around this concept, because the mech pilots of the Roppo Principality had gained a stereotype of being obsessed with swords.

"I see." Verle frowned. He understood the disadvantages facing the Swordmaidens better than anyone among the Vandals. "Leaving out the Swordmaidens and the Masters of Combat, how do you judge our chances against the Caged?"

"The news isn't all that bad, sir." Ves released a rare smile. They all needed to hear some good news. "The mech pilots from the Caged possess a lot of enthusiasm, but they are hardly elites. Similar to the members of other gangs, the average skill level among the mech pilots of the Caged is lower than average. Even if they are a force to be reckoned with in their home state, skilled mech pilots can pursue better career opportunities. In short, most of their mechs consists of spaceborn frontline mechs."

In other words, the mech pilots of the Caged wage their battles in the most basic mech models imaginable. While frontline mechs could be deadly in the right circumstances, their fixed weaponry and cheap construction meant that they exhibited poor flexibility.

"The mechs of the Caged are fast. At their most optimal states, they can outrun our Hellcats and our other medium mech models." Ves continued. "Yet even their lightest mechs can't outrun our Inheritor mechs. Our skirmishers can close the distance at a fairly good pace, though they'll have to endure several minutes of accurate laser fire. As a force based around long and medium-ranged supremacy, they rely mostly on lasers, which isn't as effective in punching through the armor of an Inheritor mech as kinetic or ballistic rounds."

Some of the Vandals in the command center smiled. As long as the Vandals faced the Caged, they could use their inherent advantages to negate their threat against the Swordmaidens.

All they needed to do was to maneuver their elements to make this favorable matchup possible.

Chapter 629 Intimidated

The Flagrant Vandals calmed down after being flustered by the unexpected presence of the Caged. The infamous gang with a reputation as powerful as the Blood Claws on Bentheim was a force to be reckoned with. Their subtle opposition against Roppo's rigid and hierarchical culture had forged them into capable warriors.

If Ves listed out the combat strengths of all four fleets in the Remoss System, then the Flagrant Vandals still possessed an absolute advantage. At their root, the task force was detached from a military mech regiment, which utilized better technologies, higher quality mechs, disciplined mech pilots and brought more forces.

Even if they hadn't brought their entire mech regiment, even if they lost half their mech pilots due to attrition, their strength was simply incomparable to any private outfit.

The Vandals possessed another advantage. Unlike the other three outfits, they had been raised as a mixed combat force, but their emphasis lay on their spaceborn assets. They possessed abundant battle experience in space and didn't shy away from increasing their advantage in this area.

Their battle credentials had also been strengthened through their recent engagements. Though they lost a lot of mechs and mech pilots, the survivors gained valuable experience on how to tackle a tough defense-oriented mech force.

Lydia's Swordmaidens were robbers masquerading as pirates. Though they possessed some tricks when it came to spaceborn combat, most of their focus lay in their landbound assets. The Vandals valued the Swordmaidens for their landbound fighting capability, but placed modest expectations on their ability to fight in space.

Both the Masters of Combat and the Caged excelled in landbound battles as well. Naturally, they possessed enough spaceborn mechs to safeguard their fleets, but their bias in favor of landbound combat worked against them now that the nearest terrestrial planet or moon was at light-hours away.

"Now that we've linked up with the Swordmaiden fleet, we will be engaging the Masters of Combat and the Caged in combat. Ready yourselves for battle!" Major Verle announced.

The Vandals appeared ambivalent at this aggressive move. The higher ups who attended the briefing beforehand all supported ganging up on the Masters of Combat with the help of the Swordmaidens. With an overwhelming number of ships and mechs, they could easily defeat the Vesian mercenary corps without paying a bloody price.

That equation changed with the surprise appearance of the Caged. The gang from Roppo might not possess any advantages, but just the fact that they could throw a bunch of mechs on the battlefield posed a significant hindrance to the Vandals.

The Vandals expected to win a battle for free. Now that they faced the prospect of a slightly more even fight, some of the Vandals became discontented. Opportunism and exploiting weaknesses had been baked into their DNA. The upcoming battle threw them out of their element.

Yet Major Verle was not yet done. He had been holding a private discussion with Commander Lydia of the Swordmaidens for several minutes. Behind the privacy screen, they did more than hash out their strategies.

The mech major turned to his communications officer. "Hail the flagship of the Caged fleet. Make it a tightbeam and do your best to hide it from outside observers."

"Sir, the enemy ships are following a constant evasion pattern. At our current distance, the beam won't hold."

Verle waved the problem away. "Just make it clear to their sub-boss that we want to speak to him. He should listen to what we have to say."

The Shield of Hispania soon cast out an invisible tightbeam that resembled a laser. It traveled forth at lightspeed and briefly brushed against the hull of the Severed Tail, the flagship of the Caged fleet.

Ordinarily, if a ship was being pinged by a laser beam, the vessel in question would do everything possible to move away. Powerful laser weapons calibrated for extreme-range fire could stretch across light-seconds and inflict measurable damage, but the stupendous range also made it ridiculously easy to dodge the beams.

In general, it was considered a waste of time to pelt an enemy fleet with lasers at this distance. The crucial seconds of delay meant that the mechs who fired their laser weapons basically had to guess the evasion pattern of their targets.

The Severed Tail initially took the low-powered tightbeam as a laser strike, so she immediately intensified her evasion efforts. The surrounding ships of the Caged followed suit, afraid that they would be the next ones being targeted.

The ships of the Caged might not boast the best armor, but their mobility was better than average. Their agile ships gracefully weaved in every direction, making it impossible to hit them with an extreme-range beam for more than a fraction of a second.

The Shield of Hispania persisted nonetheless. The gunnery officer, normally in charge of managing the Akkara heavy mechs when slotted into the bunkers across the hulls of their ships, personally took over control over the tightbeam and used his best judgement to paint it against the Severed Tail.

After a minute of intermittent hits, the Severed Tail finally did something other than attempting to dodge the beam. The entire Caged fleet ceased their high-intensity maneuvers to conserve their fuel supply and prevent the build-up of excessive heat. While their ships still followed a dodging pattern, they at least wouldn't be running on fumes.

"Sir! We've received an unknown signal!" The communications officer spoke up again. "The Severed Tail has transmitted a burst of encrypted data to us!"

Major Verle smirked. He pressed a few buttons on his projected console. "I've just sent you the encryption key."

When the Vandals sent out a tightbeam to the Severed Tail, they demanded the utmost amount of prudence. Any reply had to come in the form of an encrypted burst. If anyone was listening in on their exchange, the encryption should at least delay their eavesdropping for a couple of hours.

That was enough time to get things done.

Once the communications officer unlocked the data, he recognized its contents. "Sir, the data describes an evasion pattern!"

The Caged transmitted the mathematical formula of their own evasion pattern! Normally, this was top secret information that was only shared among a single fleet to coordinate their movements. Leaking it to an outsider could potentially be disastrous.

Now that the gunnery officer received the data, he loaded it into the targeting system and activated the tightbeam transmission. This time, the beam unerringly landed upon the hull of the Severed Tail. The transceivers of the ship read the transmission and sent out their own tightbeam transmission.

A continuous connection formed between the two vessels. Though the Vandals and the Caged went through a lot of trouble to establish this channel, it was almost absolutely secure.

While it was easier to establish a channel through their quantum entanglement nodes, this form of communication was not entirely secure. The biggest problem was that it went through too many stops. If the subject of their conversation leaked at any stage, this opportunity would be wasted.

A lower-tech tightbeam limited to a couple of isolated systems aboard both flagships was much easier to control. A proper pair of tightbeams should be invisible to any other observers out the way.

A projection appeared in front of Major Verle's face. This time, he didn't bother erecting a privacy screen.

A weathered man's face looked straight at Major Verle's face. "Flagrant Vandals. I've heard much about you. I did not expect to see you again so soon."

"I am Major Quinlist Verle. Who am I speaking to?"

Ves almost spurted his breath. So his first name was Quinlist? No wonder nobody called him by his first name! Out of every Rubarthan-style name he had heard so far, Quinlist was at the top of the silly list!

Nevertheless, the commander of the Caged fleet did not display any amusement. Due to the distance involved, a delay of several seconds ensued as the tightbeam signals had to travel several seconds back and forth.

"My name is Alain Scornburned. I am the sub-boss of this fleet."

"Can you speak on behalf of the Caged?"

Scornburned growled. "My control over my forces is complete. There is nothing holding me back. Not even my boss will countermand my decisions on the field."

The command structure of the Caged was fairly loose compared to other Roppongan organizations. That didn't mean that anarchy reigned among their

ranks, but the sub-bosses possessed enough autonomy to deviate from their directives.

The middle management of the Caged expected nothing less. If the higher ups kept a tight grip on power, then they would have proven themselves to be no better than the orthodox Roppongans.

"You know what I'm here for, Scornburned. Our goal is to annihilate the Masters of Combat. Hitching your battle wagons to a soon-to-be-deceased mercenary corps is a waste of time and resources. With or without you, we're not letting the Masters of Combat leave the Remoss System intact."

Those powerful words immediately set the tone in this negotiation, for that was what the Vandals had aimed for from the start. No matter what reasons the Caged may have to ally themselves with the Vesians, their current situation didn't seem wonderful.

Nonetheless, the sub-boss did not yield in front of the Vandals. "The Caged have made a pact with the Masters of Combat. We do not break our agreements lightly. Your efforts at dividing us is useless."

Both sides were basically posturing. An invisible war of words and implicit meanings was being waged between the two.

Verle eventually smirked after staring down the sub-boss for a few seconds. "Let me tell you what will happen if you won't buzz off. The Swordmaidens and us will catch up to the lumbering tubs of metals the Masters of Combat call their ships in an hour or two. We both know their acceleration is abysmal. Even if your fleet predominantly consists of swift and agile light carriers, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. The only way you can combine your strengths is to move as one, and that entails moving as slow as their heaviest ship."

"We can split off from the Masters of Combat and circle around the Masters of Combat."

"If you dare to do so, we'll send out our fastest mechs to chase down your forces first. Your mechs and ships lack the resilience of the Masters of Combat. Though you're not our primary target, I don't mind it if I have to clean you up first."

Scornburned did not appear pleased. It was true that the Caged was in an awful position. Facing a superior enemy force, the only way the Caged could get the better of their opponents was to leverage their mobility. Yet the necessity of partnering up with the Masters of Combat meant that their crucial advantage in this aspect couldn't be unleashed!

"In fact, if you don't accept my suggestion, I can promise you our forces will focus our firepower on your mechs over those of your already-doomed allies. It will take a while to crack the shells of their mechs, but the mechs of the Caged aren't as difficult to break."

"Don't underestimate our forces." Sub-boss Scornburned replied with a glowered face. "Anything can happen in a battle. Combining our long-ranged firepower with the defensive prowess of the Masters of Combat is a match made in heaven."

Their combination sounded good, but the problem was that it gained the most effect on land. In space, the huge distances and the three-dimensional nature of the battlefield meant that the fragile ranged mechs of the Caged wouldn't be hard to reach.

"You know that won't help you in the end. Our patience is wearing thin, sub-boss. This is our last offer. Step aside and make your way out of this star system. We didn't come here to stomp you, but we will if it's convenient."

Verle grinned at the sub-boss of the caged. For a moment, Scornburned weighed possibility of yielding in front of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens. Nobody knew what went on in his mind, including his fellow Caged.

Eventually, he came to a decision. "The Caged does not yield in front of a couple of words! We have never shied away from combat, and if we continued to yield in front of a superior force, how can we call ourselves Roppongans?! Say no more, major. We fight! See you on the battlefield!"

The feed cut off, leaving the command center with disappointed Vandals. Nobody doubted their eventual victory, but going through two outfits instead of one would lead to greater losses than anticipated.

Still, even though the sub-boss answered with a rejection, Verle didn't appear to be disappointed. If anything, his grin had widened. "Sub-boss Scornburned was playing to his own crowd. They'll fight. That can't be avoided. Yet whether they will stay is another matter."

Chapter 630 Conserving Mechs

The Flagrant Vandals had multiple reasons to force a battle at this time. However, the rank-and-file had no clue. If anything, they would rather let the Masters of Combat go now that the mechs of the Caged backed them up.

Yet turning back now meant that the Vandals might be facing the full might of their formidable landbound forces in the future. To prevent such an awful outcome, the Vandals truly had no choice but to go through with their aggressive intentions.

Ves reflected on the conversation he just witnessed. Major Verle appeared to have failed in his attempt to intimidate the Caged. Yet Verle's reminder informed them that there was more to the conversation than what appeared on the surface.

First, Sub-boss Scornburned indirectly informed them of a couple of crucial points. They were under orders to cooperate, and couldn't simply place them aside in order to ensure their survival. Second, they were under the obligation to put up a fight. Running without unleashing a single shot would certainly lead to backlash. Scornburned couldn't afford to burn his bridges with his organization.

"Had the two made some sort of implicit agreement?"

Ves got the sense that the two came to a compromise. Would the Caged stab the Masters of Combat in the back? Would they simply exchange a couple of shots and split from their ally? Or did Ves just imagined something that wasn't there?

He found it difficult to make a confident prediction of what was about to ensue. If there was anything he had learned from watching the Vandals to go war, it was that something went wrong in every battle.

"The Masters of Combat aren't pushovers. They can do a lot of damage before they go down."

The Frosty Meteors traumatized the Flagrant Vandals a few months ago. The scars from that battle had never faded. Facing a mercenary corps from the same duchy and the same mech doctrine opened up all of those scars.

Ves realized that the Vandals needed to overcome this challenge. Their rest and recuperation in Harkensen had been interrupted. Many Vandals that had been stuck on Harkensen I were unenthusiastic about fighting another battle.

They lacked confidence in themselves.

Therefore, one of the reasons Verle prioritized this battle was because he saw it as a way to heal everyone's scars and restore their confident demeanor.

Over the next hour, Ves and the higher ups planned out their strategies and tactics according to the information they had on hand. Commander Lydia of the Swordmaidens brought in her own cadre to help with the planning.

Right now, they had plenty of time before the fleets came into battle range. The ships of the Masters of Combat and the Caged had engaged their sub-light propulsion and attempted to accelerate away from the Vandals and the Swordmaidens.

Of course, they were only delaying the inevitable. The best the lumbering Vesian ships could do was to buy more time for them to prepare their own plans.

The Swordmaiden officers all possessed a wild quality that couldn't be hidden through the projectors. While the Vandal officers reeked of professionalism, the strong and unsophisticated Swordmaiden officers didn't look out of place in the frontier.

"Lydia recruits most of her Swordmaidens from the frontier." A Vandal officer quietly informed his fellow Vandals. "She routinely visits the small and isolated settlements among the untamed stars and picks up stray young girls who aren't resigned to becoming breeding objects."

In civilized space, gender inequality was a thing of the past. The differences that separated men and women had been solved by technology. A female footsoldier was just as deadly in battle as a male footsoldier. When it came to mech pilots, their mental and physiological differences had a minimal effect on their combat effectiveness.

These rules didn't necessarily apply in the frontier. The primitive settlements were deficient in development. Setting up a facility that hosted artificial wombs was beyond their means, so women had to stay home and insure the continuation of the next generation, sometimes under duress.

"The frontier isn't a pleasant place to live, especially to women."

According to the intelligence Ves had accessed, Lydia's Swordmaidens offered a way out to the more rebellious and adventurous young girls. While Commander Lydia didn't have the means to force the settlements to halt their uncivilized practices, she could at least take advantage of the situation.

Every frontier girl that Lydia inducted into her gang became fanatically loyal to her. Ves recognized the similarities between Lydia's recruitment practices and Chief Haine's favorite strategy in Pirate Empires.

"They both build their organization around themselves. They demand absolute loyalty from their subordinates."

One of the most precious resources in the galaxy was loyalty. All the money in the world couldn't necessarily buy the dedication of another person. Humans were emotional and irrational, and did not necessarily behave as predicted.

Grooming those that sought salvation from young was one of the best ways to raise a completely loyal force. Though it took a lot of time, Ves had to hand it to Lydia. Her investment had definitely paid off, seeing that she grew her Swordmaidens into a formidable force in the frontier.

"All of these analyses are well and good, but at the end of the day we need to smash them into pieces!" The middle-aged woman spoke. Lydia may have aged past her prime, but her athletic body and striped grey-and-black hair conveyed a ferocious image. Her Amazon-like appearance alone deterred most people in the frontier from starting any trouble. "Since you Vandals are shaking in your boots whenever you think about the Masters of Combat, leave their thick mechs to us. My Swordmaidens will carve out their mech pilots from their protective shells."

"Commander Lydia, we don't wish to doubt your capabilities, but the Masters of Combat can inflict a ruinous amount of damage to us." Major Verle replied.

"Their mechs are tough to fell without committing our mechs, but if we do so the ranged mechs of the Caged will box us in from the flanks."

"What're you suggesting, then?"

"Ignore the Masters of Combat for now and chase down the mechs of the Caged."

"That won't work. They'll turtle behind the Masters of Combat. We'll have to get through the Vesians in order to strike at the Roppongans, which puts us back to the beginning. We might as well aim at the Masters of Combat first."

The Vandals disagreed. If they didn't put any pressure on the Roppongans, they would be free to leverage their superior firepower. Getting pelted by an unending stream of lasers was not a pleasant experience.

It made no sense to throw their mechs to a force whose best aspect was defence. While they possessed a fair amount of firepower, their first emphasis meant they had made a lot of tradeoffs that had weakened their offensive firepower.

On the other hand, the ranged mechs of the Caged possessed a lot of offensive power but possessed few defenses. They mainly relied on their mobility to evade attacks, but that wouldn't help them very much if the enemy closed into knife-fighting range.

"There are ways to force them away from the Masters of Combat." Verle said. "We can play the long game. Though the mechs of the Caged are deadly at range, they haven't brought too many spaceborn mechs."

Major Verle proposed a battle plan that demanded patience. Though the Swordmaidens showed some dissatisfaction, Commander Lydia eventually agreed to the plan. If she had an opportunity to minimize her losses, she would take it over the objection of her Swordmaidens.

"My Swordmaidens will follow your lead this time." She nodded before the projections of the Swordmaidens winked out.

An hour later, the two combined fleets had caught up to each other. The servicemen aboard the Shield of Hispania already started referring to the combined Vandal-Swordmaiden force as the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

As for the opposing force, the Vandals all wracked their minds for a suitable moniker and eventually settled on calling them the Caged Masters.

Ves had a laugh when he heard those names. Some of the servicement must have been truly bored when they came up with those shorthands.

Still, the time for jokes was over as the mech forces came into fighting range. Though not all of the ships of the Flagrant Swordmaidens moved very fast, they had simply decided to split their ship assets in two.

The combat fleet would surge forward at their best acceleration in order to catch up to their prey.

The support fleet which consisted of all of their transport ships and logistics ships was left behind with a number of guard mechs to keep them safe.

It wasn't ideal, but cutting away their slowest vessels was the only way the Flagrant Swordmaidens could catch up to the Caged Masters without ruinously overloading their sublight propulsion.

The Masters of Combat weren't stupid. They could do the math like anyone else, and they quickly figured out that they couldn't avoid this battle if they ran away at normal acceleration. The First Master who headed the Masters of Combat knew his chances of victory was low at this moment, so he decisively chose to overload the engines and thrusters of his ships.

This ruinous decision would wreck the propulsion of his ships and force them into months of repair work if they ever made it out. Yet that was better than the prospect of total annihilation.

The First Master also made the cunning decision to split off his non-combat vessels in their own support fleet. The useless transports and logistics ships flew off in another direction, baiting the Flagrant Swordmaidens into diverting their forces.

Major Verle and Commander Lydia didn't take the bait. The key to destroying the Caged Masters was to wipe out their combat forces. Crushing their support ships might inconvenience them a lot, but they could easily acquire more supplies and support ships.

The combat fleet of the Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't bother to overload their own propulsion. Most of their ships were still able to keep up!

Now that they had entered effective combat range, the mechs of the Caged made their first move. Their laser cannons and rifles pelted the Flagrant Swordmaidens with surprisingly accurate aim!

They unleashed most of their firepower on the slower and heavier mechs of the Flagrant Swordmaidens. They ignored the ships because they possessed too much armor.

The medium mechs of the Vandals took the brunt of the offensive.

As for the Swordmaidens, their melee mechs remained in their hangar bays. They wouldn't be able to play any role in a long-ranged firefight. Their time would come when the fleets closed in on each other, but for now the Swordmaidens only deployed their limited number of space knights and rifleman mechs.

"Put our combat carriers to the front." Verle commanded. "Inform Captain Rakeshir to offer up our heaviest armored combat carriers as cover. Since we recently fixed them up, it should be no problem for them to take a beating."

Captain Rakeshir aboard the Antecedent quickly called back. His projected face looked angrily at the mech officer. "Major, I highly advise you to reconsider your last order! Our combat carriers are not slabs of alloys for your mechs to hide behind! We need our armor to remain in good condition for the challenges that lay ahead."

"I will take your suggestion under advisement, but my decision stands. We cannot afford to risk the lives of our mech pilots at this point. Right now, their lives are more precious than plates of armor. You can always patch up your ships afterwards with metals mined from asteroids."

The captain looked pissed, but he had no way to fight back. In the greater scheme of things, the major had a point. They needed to conserve their mechs and mech pilots more than the armor of their combat carriers.

"Very well, sir. I'll relay the orders and move our combat carriers into position."

This decision might bite them back in the future, but Verle gladly accepted this possibility if it meant closing in on the Caged Masters without losing a quarter of their mechs.