

### Chapter 631 Multipurpose Mechs

The combat carriers of the Vandal fleet had taken a beating from the Vesians over the course of several battles. Sending them to the repair yards of Harkensen III had done them a lot of good. Though they hadn't returned to their original condition, there was no question that they could take a beating.

The ranged mechs of the Caged and soon after the Masters of Combat tried their best to whittle down the incoming force of Vandals and Swordmaidens. The ranged Vandals mechs deployed in space didn't particularly excel in long-ranged combat. They half-heartedly fired their laser rifles at the distant enemies, and hit perhaps about one out of fifteen shots.

Those armed with ballistic weapons didn't even bother firing yet. Anything other than a railgun or a weapon that fired rounds that traveled at relativistic speeds had a chance of hitting the targets. However, that would soon change as the range between the two forces decreased.

The ranged mechs of the Caged and the Masters of Combat predominantly relied on laser weapons. The Caged went for accuracy while the Masters of Combat emphasized staying power. While some of their mechs were capable of firing shells or kinetic projectiles, their influence in the battle could be ignored.

The Vandal ships getting raked by long-ranged fire absorbed the laser beams like champions. The combat carriers spun around like a drill as they followed evasive patterns. This made it difficult for laser beams to penetrate through the armor plating and reach inside the compartments.

By spreading the damage around in this manner, the combat carriers with the thickest armor lasted several minutes against a sustained barrage from the Caged Masters. The only reason why this interval was so short was because the enemy deployed over three companies of ranged mechs.

"Our ships can't sustain this beating for long!" Captain Rakeshir said over the comm channel. The senior ship captain never forgave Major Verle after he ordered the carriers to be used as shields. "By the end of this battle, the cost of replacing the damaged armor plating will reach more than several billion credits! And that's if we assume we can afford to send our ships back to repair yards!"

The mech commander dismissed the complaints. "The price is worth it if we can injure the Caged and take out the Masters of Combat. Don't forget what we are fighting for, captain. Resources are meant to be used."

That put an end to Rakeshir's objections. The captain turned his attention to micromanaging the formation of the combat fleet.

Though Ves was not a specialist in ship maneuvers, their current formation wasn't hard to understand. Lydia's Swordmaidens needed to be protected. Their only combat carrier was their flagship, and the vessel happened to be an aged, second-hand rustbucket. The remainder of their vessels consisted of a mix of light carriers and converted cargo haulers.

In other words, tin cans in space. It wouldn't take the rifleman mechs of the Caged a very long time to burn through the scrap that posed as their armor plating.

Only the combat carriers of the Flagrant Vandals possessed the bulk to absorb all of the laser fire. They flew in front, each combat carrier taking up the vanguard position for a couple of minutes before falling back. This was a very clever arrangement as it was meant to handle the heat transferred through the laser beams.

Therefore, even if the battle looked as if the Vandals took a beating for no reason, the actual damage amounted to using up a lot of expensive armor plates

"The same can't be said for the Caged Masters." Ves shook his head.

He felt pity for the enemy for getting caught up in a battle where they were outclassed in almost every aspect. The Vandals basically bullied their opponents, having caught them when they were unable to display their specialization. No matter how strong they performed on land, no matter how many landbound mechs they could field, the Vandals would never fight a battle at an environment of their choosing.

The Vandal spaceborn mechs consisted of a mixed bag of mech models centered around a trio of internally developed mech models.

Right now, the Vandals put the Akkara heavy mechs on reserve. The landbound mechs had already slotted themselves into the bunkers placed along the hulls of the combat carriers. While their firepower was prodigious, their impact was best at close range.

Their other ranged mechs steadily put pressure on the thickly-armored mechs of the Masters of Combat. The Vandals couldn't get at the fragile mechs of the Caged once they decided to hide behind their bulk. However, the well-armored Masters of Combat mechs couldn't never outmatch a combat carrier in armor.

"The Venidsan mechs are straining against our barrage! Half-a-dozen mechs have already sustained heavy damage! They're pulling back from their formation!"

Ves inspected the sensor readings of the damaged mechs. He had already pulled up the mech model from the central database.

The mainstay mech model of the Masters of Combat consisted of Nyven Skrat multipurpose space knights. In general, any mech type with the multipurpose prefix was just a way of saying that it carried a mixture of weapons.

Similar to hybrid mechs that sought to marry several weapon systems in a single frame, these multipurpose mechs attempted to offer a high degree of flexibility on the battlefield. They didn't pop up that much in the galactic rim because technological, material and financial limitations prevented them from reaching their full potential. A minimal degree of investment was necessary to make them viable against single-purpose mech types.

"Evidently, the Masters of Combat ignored this rule."

The elite mercenary corps fielded the Nyven Skrats in great numbers. They took advantage of scale to simplify their logistics and unify their training.

The Nyven Skrats featured four different weapon systems: a sword and shield, a laser rifle, a warpick great for piercing armor and a pair of missile launchers embedded in the torso.

All of these options turned the Nyven Skrats into a souped-up hybrid with plenty of options that could react to many different situations. Only extremely well-rounded mech pilots would be able to pilot them proficiently. This didn't hinder the Venidsan mercenary corps as they predominantly recruited veterans from the Vesian mech legions.

The Masters of Combat had a reason to adopt this arrogant name. Each of their mech pilots were combat obsessed and spent most of their time on polishing their piloting skills.

However, a jack of all trades was a master of none. Compared to the dedicated rifleman mechs of the Caged, the Masters of Combat fell short in both power and accuracy. The Nyven Skrats also needed to conserve their energy levels, so they didn't fire as frequently as they should.

"Entering medium range in thirty seconds!"

Once the fleets entered medium range, the mechs armed with kinetic or ballistic weaponry entered effective range. Thirty seconds flitted by and a significant amount of Vandal mechs lent their fire to the constant barrage.

The battle formation of the Caged Masters physically buckled! Shell after shell exploded against the durable armor plating of the mechs. Powerful kinetic rounds impacted the Nyven Skrats with force, cracking their resilient shells and crippling some of their more vulnerable components when hit!

"Mr. Larkinson, what is your judgement on the Nyven Skrats?" Major Verle suddenly asked. "I want to hear options on how to defeat them as economically as possible."

Ves had studied the multipurpose space knight model just enough to come up with an analysis backed by his professional judgement.

"Sir, the Nyven Skrats sound impressive if you list out their capabilities, but when you dig into their construction, they are riddled with holes. Multipurpose mechs aren't very popular for a very good reason. The sheer amount of compromises in their design choices has led to many internal flaws. The only reason why the Nyven Skrats are viable is because they carry enough armor to qualify as knights."

"So only their outer shells are tough?"

"Correct, sir. While that doesn't make it easy to get at their weak points, our job is mostly done once we can accomplish. The Nyven Skrats feature two major weak points. First, the integrated missile launchers are placed in their pectorals. One heavy hit is enough to demolish the launchers, opening up a gaping hole that's uncomfortably close to the cockpit and the power reactor. If the Masters of Combat are using low-quality missiles, then there's a high chance we can set off their warheads as well, causing a chain reaction that can blow up a Nyven Skrat from a single lucky hit."

Ves thought this was unlikely to happen, as the Masters of Combat was aware of this weakness as well. If they deliberately chose to rely on this mech model, then they would have invested in more expensive missiles with plenty of safeguards against unwanted detonations.

"That's one weakness. What is the other one?"

"Their rear." Ves replied with a grin. "Their flight system isn't all that powerful. It's only merit is that it's plated with armor, but they can't withstand a determined attack. The rear armor of the Nyven Skrats is also thinner compared to a regular knight. Volume management is a very huge issue with this multipurpose mech. It has stuffed too many systems in a single frame and there's only so much you can stretch it out without going through the upper bounds of what defines a medium mech."

Though the Masters of Combat focus on defensive tactics, their most complex tactics demanded enough mobility to react to various situations. Speed, acceleration and agility generally benefited skilled mech pilots more because they were able to leverage these advantages a lot better than lesser mech pilots.

Major Verle mulled on what Ves had passed on. "Very well. Attacking them from the front and rear is sufficient."

"Their armor is highly resilient against both laser weapons and ballistic weapons. Melee weapons can carve through the weak points of their armor, but multiple attacks may be needed to punch through, sir."

For now, the Vandals hadn't managed to wreck more than a handful of Nyven Skrats. Even at medium range, the mechs put forward their resilient tower shields and let them take the brunt of the incoming fire.

The shields didn't last very long against sustained volleys, but the most unnerving thing about the Masters of Combat was that they brought spares!

Verle grunted in annoyance. "The Nyven Skrats are impervious from the front. A flanking force is needed to pressure the Masters of Combat from the rear."

With the fleets coming ever closer, the firefight in space heated up. By now, he judged that the combat carriers had served their purpose. It wasn't worth it to risk greater damage than a couple of scorched and molten armor plates. The Vandal fleet pulled back a bit while they deployed their full complement of spaceborn mechs.

The Swordmaidens followed suit. With both fleets putting out their full might, they accelerated ahead and lessened the distance in rapid tempo!

Ves did not recognize the mech model utilized by the Swordmaidens. Neither the central database or the galactic net contained a record that mentioned anything similar to the spaceborn swordsman mechs racing towards the enemy!

"Do the Swordmaidens have a mech designer?"

Ves instantly recognized the homebrew quality of their swordsman mechs. Some of their parts looked crude, while their overall level performance indicated that the quality of their components was rather inconsistent.

Despite all these flaws, the Swordmaiden mechs did have one thing going for them. They were fast. Really fast. In fact, all of their swordsman mechs mounted powerful single-use boosters on their backs. Somehow the boosters managed to work in harmony with their flight systems, allowing the mechs to accelerate in space to the very limits of their inertial dampeners.

"Commander Lydia!" Major Verle composed a message to their partner. "We did not agree for the Swordmaidens to advance ahead of our mechs! We had a plan!"

The Swordmaidens ignored his plea and continued surging forward! Ves figured this wouldn't be the last time the Swordmaidens followed their instincts rather than their orders.

### Chapter 632 Misty Slasher

Willful pirate mech pilots aside, the Swordmaiden mechs that had left the Vandal mechs in the dust accelerated extremely fast. The booster packs mounted to their rear must have put a heavy amount of pressure on the mech frame, yet they all somehow managed to hold together. That took skill. Not any mech designer could produce a mech that could withstand these forces.

"The Swordmaiden mech designers are pretty good." Ves softly muttered. His eyes penetrated through the design and recognized it as a collaboration work. "This spaceborn swordsman mech design combines multiple specialties in a single frame."

Though it fell short in many aspects, when it came to its strengths, it could truly compete against proper commercial mech models. This was not some amateur work from a bunch of inexperienced Novices.

He sent out a data request to the Swordmaiden flagship. A couple of seconds later, his control panel displayed a very brief spec sheet of what the Swordmaidens called the Misty Slasher.

"Fast and powerful!"

The spec sheet confirmed most of the guesses that Ves had made about the design. The Misty Slasher was designed as a peak performance mech. It was capable of delivering a powerful burst of performance, excelling in both mobility and offensive power. Their booster packs and oversized flight systems allowed them to maneuver fast in space while their huge broadswords allowed them to overpower most defenses through sheer brute force!



Though these mechs didn't have the staying power to last more than half an hour in a high-intensity battle, most spaceborn battles in the frontier never lasted that long. Only rarely would pirates become engulfed in a lengthy battle or a long campaign.

The Misty Slashers happened to excel in short skirmishes! While the battle taking place at this very moment went beyond a simple skirmish, for the moment they possessed a definite advantage!

The rifleman mechs of the Caged instantly split off from the mechs of the Masters of Combat and tried to widen the distance. The thin and agile mechs moved faster than the Misty Slashers if they hadn't activated their boosters. However, the latter still stood a chance of catching as long as they didn't run out of fuel for their boosters.

"Commander Lydia! Your mechs are focusing on the wrong target! We agreed to take out the rifleman mechs first!"

"My apologies, major. Commander Lydia has just deployed in the field."

Major Verle growled. Though the Vandals treated the Swordmaidens as an equal partner in this teamup, the truth was that they were very different mech outfits. Both of them maintained very different standards of discipline!

A more resplendent spaceborn swordsman mech emerged from the bowels of the Swordmaiden flagship! Commander Lydia herself had entered the battlefield! Ves quickly figured out that Lydia's mech was a custom job. It carried over the same principles of the Misty Slasher, but performed much better as it made use of much more expensive exotics.

"That's basically throwing money at the mech to forcefully uplift its performance!"

This was considered to be a wasteful exercise. Design choices that made sense with cheaper materials might not be the most efficient solutions when

replaced with higher quality materials. Support beams didn't need to be as thick, and armor plating can be thinner as well. The weight distribution of the mech had shifted its balance and other properties.

Basically, Ves thought it was better if Commander Lydia piloted a mech that was designed to be expensive from the start.

Nonetheless, these gripes did not detract from the custom Misty Slasher's excellent performance. Its supercharged boosters closed the distance to the enemy mechs more than twice as fast as the regular Misty Slashers! It descended on the ranks from the Masters of Combat and stabbed forward with the full force of its momentum behind the blow!

The Nyven Skrat in the way sensed the threat and opened its launcher ports. A small volley of rockets whipped from the chest launchers and impacted the custom mech as it charged with indomitable courage!

"Too weak!" Lydia howled. The madness that made her such a force to be reckoned with in the frontier came to the fore. "Come! Baptise my mech!"

The rockets impacted her mech, causing its frontal armor to crack. Nonetheless, only the uppermost layer had been affected. Her mech continued to boost forward without any sign of stopping!

A huge soundless impact scarred the Nyven Skrat in the way! Lydia's broadsword ran straight through the heavy chest armor of the Masters of Combat mech. With a hefty jerk, the sword sliced its way out of the chest, conveniently gouging the broken mech until it became unrecoverable.

The initial stab had been precise enough to pierce through the cockpit. The mech didn't have the time to offer any resistance before its mech pilot bought the farm.

The other Swordmaiden mechs weren't able to replicate Lydia's feat, but their heavy broadswords posed a very real threat to the Nyven Skrats. The

multipurpose mechs weren't able to utilize laser rifles at this range, and they had already emptied out their missile launchers at the initial stage. Though the missiles and rockets took out a handful of unlucky Swordmaidens, the rest of them weathered the barrage and began to engage the Masters of Combat in melee!

Both the Swordmaidens and the Masters of Combat were proficient in melee. The mechs belonging to the latter outfit predominantly utilized their swords and shields, recognizing that they needed to depend on their tower shields to withstand the heavy sword blows of the pirate mechs.

Lacking in both mobility and reach, the Nyven Skrats did not fare well against the Misty Slashers. In general, swordsman mechs predominantly countered knight-type mechs because their advantages allowed them to strike at the weak points of the sluggish knights.

Numerous Swordmaidens grouped up and focused their offensive on a designated Nyven Skrat. The multipurpose knight was able to fend off the Misty Slasher hacking mindlessly from the front, but that left its rear without any defense! Two Misty Slashers dove in to take out its vulnerable rear, only for another Nyven Skrat to position itself in front of its vulnerable counterpart.

The twin sword chops dug a deep groove in the tower shield of the rescuing Nyven Skrat, but it managed to hold! The Masters of Combat mech even took advantage of the recovery period of the Misty Slashers and inflicted a deep blow in the sides of one of the Swordmaiden mechs!

"The Swordmaidens have the advantage in mechs, but the Masters of Combat are much more skilled!"

This difference played out just as the Vandals had feared. No matter how well Lydia's Swordmaidens trained her mech pilots, it was a well-known fact that

they did not particularly excel in spaceborn combat. They showed more enthusiasm than skill in this battle.

The Masters of Combat was different. Their highly-trained and versatile mech pilots were able to pull out the full strength of their multipurpose mechs. Even when they faced a bad matchup, they still managed to halt the deadly momentum of the Swordmaidens.

Their current disadvantage wasn't a function of their skill, but rather their insufficient numbers. They invested too much in their landbound mechs and didn't acquire enough spaceborn mechs to defend their fleet from threats in space!

"Bunch of ill-trained pirates!" Major Verle cursed. "They've fallen into the trap of the Venidsans!"

Right now, the Masters of Combat managed to turn around their disadvantage by adopting a defensive posture. They rarely went for the kill, instead opting to focus at least ninety percent of their efforts on defense.

This was the appropriate strategy to adopt because the feral Swordmaiden mech pilots became engulfed in their bloodlust. Presented with an attractive punching bag, they threw all their considerations of strategy out of their minds! The only priority in their minds was to vent their fury on the stoic Masters of Combat.

"Sisters! Victory is within sight!"

"Carve them apart!"

"Their shells will crack!"

"Pah! Those smelly Vandal brutes are no help at all!"

The only mech pilot worth a damn was Commander Lydia herself. None of the others accomplished anything other than battering the tower shields of the

Nyven Skrats. Their efficiency was exceptionally poor as their powerful sword strikes wasted a lot of energy, draining their energy cells in rapid tempo!

Ves and most of the Vandals recognized what the Masters of Combat were up to. Their larger, heavier Nyven Skrats ran on fuel cells. Though this didn't enable the Nyven Skrats to deliver any powerful blows, the multipurpose mech became quite frugal in their energy expenditure when it defaulted to defense.

After all, the Misty Slashers needed to build up their momentum and exert maximum force in delivering their heavy blows. The Nyven Skrats on the other hand merely had to brace their shields against incoming attacks. They also had to engage their flight system to stabilize their posture and prevent them from spinning once the blow connected.

"What a huge mess." Ves shook his head.

From what he understood, Major Verle initially came up with a battle plan to take the Caged out of the equation as fast as possible. Their hit-and-run style attacks worked best over time. If the Flagrant Swordmaidens became preoccupied with cracking the tough mechs of the Masters of Combat, then the flanking Caged mechs would have plenty of time to rain down their laser beams on the Vandals and the Swordmaidens.

"Vandals, stick to the plan. If the Swordmaidens want to entertain the Masters of Combat, then that's their business."

The offensive might of the Caged needed to be taken care of regardless of this unanticipated change. In the original plan, the mobile mechs of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens should have overwhelmed the ranged mechs right at the point of contact.

After the Caged lost dozens of mechs at once, Sub-Boss Scornburned would be able to seize upon the shock inflicted upon his subordinates and call for a

hasty retreat. This effectively put an entire outfit out of play within the span of a single minute!

This was a plan straight out of Major Verle's playbook! The mech officer constantly sought to boost the morale of his allies while attempting to break the morale of his opponents.

Ves sighed from his observation seat. "Too bad that doesn't work now. The Swordmaidens aimed their powerful offensive power at the wrong mechs."

Many Vandals in the command center gritted their teeth at the braindead behavior of Lydia's Swordmaidens. They had never expected these savvy pirates that have managed to survive in the frontier for decades to be this impulsive on the battlefield.

Then again, their usual opponents weren't much better.

Waves of Vandal Inheritor mechs descended upon the rifleman mechs of the Caged. The cunning Roppongan mech pilots saw the skirmisher mechs coming and most managed to dodge the twin dagger strikes at the last moment.

It turned out that the ranged mechs incorporated miniature boosters along its frame that easily allowed it to evade incoming attacks. Though Ves predicted that these miniboosters wouldn't be able to displace the rifleman mechs more than half-a-dozen times. Yet their impact on the battle was profound. The mech pilots of the Caged utilized this initial boost to accelerate out of the reach of the confounded Inheritors.

The confusion among the Vandal mech pilots didn't last very long. Now that they knew what they were dealing with, they adjusted their strategies and formed groups that attempted to gang up on the Caged mechs from multiple directions.

Still, all of this cost time, during which the Roppongan mechs steadily chipped away at the lightly-armored Inheritor mechs. At close range, it wasn't easy for the Caged mech pilots to track the swift and complex movements of the skirmisher mechs, but they did manage to score some fatal hits, disabling more and more Vandal mechs.

Fortunately, the inherently inferior penetration power of a laser weapon granted the Inheritor mech pilots enough leeway to eject their cockpits in time. Tens of them had ejected in the first minute. Their cockpits soared towards the Vandal combat carriers without interruption as their opponents didn't wish to drive the Vandals over the edge.

"Come on! This is taking too long! Those rifleman mechs need to be taken down this instant!"

The longer the battle went on, the more the Swordmaiden mechs exhausted themselves. While the Vandals still believed they held the upper hand, the losses became increasingly more severe. They could not afford to incur heavy damage at this point.

### **Chapter 633 Costly Add-on**

Space became littered with mechs and debris. Over a stretch of tens to hundreds of thousands of kilometers, the trail of wrecks unceasingly grew as the battle raged on. The death toll grew as well, particularly on the side of the Caged Masters.

The lethality of melee weapons surpassed the deadliness of rifle weapons. Laser weapons especially harvested the least lives as mech pilots were usually able to eject in time.

When faced with swords or daggers, a single well-placed hit could easily pierce through mech armor meant to withstand hardy kinetic rounds. The Vandal Inheritor mech pilots might not be the best representatives of their

mech regiment, but their rigorous training and discipline quickly pulled them through.

While the rifleman mechs of the Caged managed to survive up to now with the help of their miniboosters, their less sophisticated cousins didn't fare so well. The genetic aptitude of many mech pilots of the Caged was rather poor. Putting them in humanoid mechs was a waste, so they piloted frontline mechs instead.

These cheap, disposable machines incorporated miniboosters as well, but their mech pilots weren't skilled enough to evade the determined Inheritor mechs. The Vandal skirmishers soon figured out the evasion pattern of the frontline mechs, and teamed up to place another teammate in the direction of the automatic activation of the miniboosters.

The frontline mechs fell in quick succession. The rifleman mechs of the Caged moved to rescue their brethren, but before they could move to help, the rest of the Vandal spaceborn mechs arrived.

"Hellcats! Get right up in their face!"

The Inheritor mechs weren't meant to destroy the mechs of the Caged on their own. Their primary goal was to entangle the enemy ranged mechs and force them to slow down in their flight. This granted the Vandal medium mechs the opportunity to catch up to the battle.

The Hellcat hybrid space knights made their presence known, leading a formation of many different Vesian mech models into the fray!

"Commence Chosen Shock Charge!"

Missiles darted out from their shoulder launchers, each of them forcing the Caged mechs into a defensive posture.



Once the Hellcats neared the rifleman mechs, they fired their wrist-mounted nail drivers instead. The agile Caged mechs mostly managed to dodge the short-ranged projectiles, but the ones that got hit suffered a severe piercing blow that punched right through their fragile armor.

The Caged mechs only had a couple of seconds left before the Hellcat mechs all slammed their shields into their disoriented frames! Though the Vandals wasn't able to field the Hellcat mechs in great numbers, their courageous charge had a disproportionate impact on their targets! Each mech they slammed into suffered an enormous amount of concussive damage.

With their frontal armor crunched and their mech pilots jarred from the shock, the vulnerable rifleman mechs couldn't do anything as the Hellcat mechs delivered the coup-de-grace with their swords.

Now that they caught up, the main force of the Flagrant Vandals finally unleashed their full might!

With the arrival of the Vandal prestige mechs, the battle instantly took a turn for the worse to the Caged. The predominantly ranged force had no hope of fending off the melee mechs of the Vandals. With the swift and agile Inheritors cutting off their escape routes, the Hellcats and the other Vandal medium mechs formed into pre-arranged formations and came at the disheveled gang mechs with unstoppable force.

"Double Chevron Assault!"

Mech squads formed into double-ranked chevrons and slammed into the Caged mechs. If the first impact didn't finish them off, the follow-up attacks guaranteed the kills. With the use of this formation, the disparity between the two forces widened! The Caged could never match the coordination of the Flagrant Vandals!

"Retreat!" Sub-boss Scornburned finally ordered. "The Flagrant Vandals can't be overcome! Let us depart!"

Ordinarily, the mech pilots of the Caged would never retreat so easily. Roppongans took their honor very seriously. Yet they had already started sliding into defeat ever since the Inheritor mechs caught up to them. The sudden shock attacks by the Hellcat mechs had tipped over their courage, causing them to waver just enough for the sub-boss to recognize the moment.

They had to retreat! As ignoble as it sounded, it was better than to perish against a foe they could never hope to defeat!

The mech pilots of the Caged had lost their nerve and flew their mechs back to their carriers as swiftly as possible. The Inheritors followed them but kept their distance. Their presence was meant to pressure the Caged and prevent them from regaining their courage.

The Hellcats and the other medium mechs turned to the mechs of the Masters of Combat. The Misty Slasher mechs started to run out of steam. While their berserk fighting methods might have been a recipe for success in the frontier, the Masters of Combat was made up entirely of seasoned veterans and elite mercenaries.

The Vandals needed to save the Swordmaidens from their own blunder!

"The battle is over now." Ves declared to himself. Even though they hit a couple of snags, they still managed to achieve the expected result. "It feels good to be on the superior side for once."

Still, the Vandals didn't let down their guards. They expected the Caged to crumble early, but they expected more from the Masters of Combat. Even now, their Nyven Skrats still managed to withstand the offensive. Now that the Vandal medium mechs had entered the fray, their situation became

increasingly dire. If they still held back a trump card, then now would be the final time to put it into play.

Major Verle turned to Ves. "Those enhanced sensor arrays you produced. How much do you trust them?"

"With my life, sir. They might not be able to pick up anything fancy from the Friday Coalition of the Hexadric Hegemony, but at our level it's more than enough."

"Good. Initiate full active scanning! I want those sensors and detectors pumped up to the highest power!"

Not every Inheritor had raced ahead to tackle the Caged mechs. The Vandals held at least a company of Inheritors, half of which bore the crucial sensor upgrades. They formed the main line of defense against any threats that attempted to sneak up to their ships.

Upon the major's command, a series of scanning arrays popped up from the heads of the light mechs. A powerful pulse of energy surged from the arrays. Within a range of thousands of kilometers, the entire space around the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet rippled with invisible waves.

Nothing became visible, but that didn't mean nothing was there!

"We've detected several anomalous signals to the rear of our ship! Range, two-hundred kilometers!"

"Akkara mechs, open fire at the suspect coordinates!"

The heavy mechs entrenched in the bunkers of the Shield of Hispania and the other Vandals ships all erupted their heavy cannons in the direction of the anomalous readings. Hundreds of laser beams and physical rounds saturated the region.

Within a spread of tens of kilometers, one explosive shell hit something other than empty space. A stealthed object immediately lost its transparent visage and became visible to the naked eye!

"It's a stealthed boarding shuttle!"

The explosive shell had ripped through the thinly-armored shuttle, blasting apart its entire frontal section! The continuous volleys of the Akkara mechs soon hit other stealthed shuttles.

By the time the heavy artillery mechs fired ten volleys in quick succession, the entire area around the first shuttle became riddled with pieces of shuttle wreckage!

"What is the result?"

"Sir, our Akkara mechs have taken out seven stealthed shuttles in total! There are no survivors!"

The Vandals in the command center grinned when they heard how many precious stealth shuttles they destroyed. These high-tech toys cost a pretty penny to produce. Ever since the Flagrant Vandals aimed at the Masters of Combat, they did not believe a word about their inability to acquire stealth tech on their own.

"The Masters of Combat are made out of elite veteran Venidsan mech pilots. If any mercenary company has access to stealth tech, then they should be at the front of the list!"

Ever since Ves returned to the fleet, his trauma against stealth technology had compelled him to hit the books. He crammed through several books on anti-stealth tech. He still retained his position as head designer, so much of the knowledge library of the Mech Corps was open to him. Though the central database prohibited the dissemination of knowledge on stealth tech, books on how to counter them was readily available.

"Though I only had a day to read through a couple of books, that is more than enough to install some upgraded sensors on a handful of light mechs."

His paranoia paid off. The Venidsan mercenary corps had indeed planned to perform a fatal strike from stealth! Ves couldn't even imagine the damage the invisible shuttles could unleash to the unsuspecting Vandals.

Catching them off-guard and shooting them down before they could run or close the distance was the best outcome possible!

Ves softly laughed as nothing remained of the expensive shuttle and their well-trained boarding parties. The sensor readings could barely pick up the minute pieces of rubble. He enjoyed getting the better out of sneaky bastards attempting to ruin his life.

"It feels good to catch these Venidsan mice. I should make these sensor upgrades more prevalent among the Inheritor mechs."

The only reason why he couldn't upgrade all of the light skirmishers was because it was a fairly expensive upgrade. Ves had made a conscious decision as head designer to deviate from Professor Velten's standard design templates. Though he could justify his decision if it only affected a small portion of the Vandal mechs, if he insisted on making it a standard feature, then he would violate a bunch of rules, the most important of which was budget stipulations.

"If five million extra credits per mech allows me to sleep better at night, what does it matter?"

This didn't sound like a lot, but it increased the costs associated with the Inheritor mechs by twenty-five percent. The powerful sensor arrays were also very delicate, requiring frequent servicing in order to keep them functioning at their optimum states.

"It's not economical to arm a hundred Inheritors with this upgrade."

The Inheritors were meant to be cheap and disposable. Turning them all into expensive detection platforms was a step too far to the Vandals.

"Keep sweeping our perimeter with active scans. I don't want any space rock left unturned!"

Though a follow-up attack seemed unlikely, the Vandals did not mind wasting their energy on continuous scans.

The mech battle up ahead entered into the final stage. The Masters of Combat had been holding out hope that their stealth shuttles were able to turn the tide of the battle. Now that the Vandals wiped them all out before they could complete their missions, the Venidsan mercenaries had nothing left to throw at the Vandals!

Nonetheless, the Vesians stoically kept fighting even as the Vandal mechs took over from the exhausted Misty Slashers. While the Swordmaidens recalled their mechs, the Masters of Combat began to buckle.

Their multipurpose space knights endured a lot of hits, but their lack of mobility became their downfall. In front of the coordinated might of the Vandals, they were unable to move and had to force themselves into a spherical formation with every mech facing outwards. While this prevented the Vandals from striking at their rear, the relatively rigid formation fared very poorly against ranged bombardments.

The Vandal ships soon entered into firing range. The Akkara mechs unleashed volley after volley of heavy firepower. The Nyven Skrats didn't last. The continuous outpouring of laser cannon beams and high-explosive shells shredded their thick tower shields and pounded their frames until they broke up into pieces.

The Vandals didn't ask for surrender, and to their credit the Vesian mech pilots didn't ask for any. There could be no reconciliation between Brighters

and Vesians, especially when the stakes were so high. They did not fight on behalf of their states right now. All of their decisions were being influenced by the players in the shadow.

"Sweep the battlefield and prepare to catch up to their ships." Major Verle commanded. "Tell Commander Lydia to pursue their combat fleet. Their escort mechs shouldn't be a hindrance to them. Make sure she understands to take the flagship intact. Inform Captain Rakeshir to separate from the Swordmaiden fleet in order to pursue the support ships. If we hurry up now, we might be able to catch up to them before they transition into FTL."

The Flagrant Swordmaidens managed to secure their first victory ever since they joined forces! Though everyone was already salivating about the spoils, not everyone seemed pleased by the outcome.

#### Chapter 634 Ego

The rest of the battle progressed with no suspense. After overwhelming and dismantling the Nyven Skrats, the Masters of Combat lost their principal force of mechs. Their slow and hefty frontline mechs and ranged mechs crumbled in quick succession.

"They really counted on their stealth attack to turn this battle around." Ves recognized.

That had given the Vesian mercenaries enough hope to put up a heroic last stand against a superior force. However, once the Vandals caught and demolished the stealth shuttles in an instant, the Masters of Combat folded within seconds!

The Flagrant Swordmaidens encountered no significant resistance upon mopping up the rest. While they allowed the remnants of the Caged to flee from the star system without any further harassment, the ships of the Masters of Combat needed to fall in their hands.

"Contact the Masters of Combat. Issue a surrender demand." Major Verle spoke as soon as the Masters of Combat lost every remaining spaceborn mech in the field. "They've lost enough lives as it is. There is no need for further bloodshed."

While the Vandals didn't mind exterminating every last Master of Combat, driving their defeated opponents to the brink might provoke them to self-destruct their defenseless ships. The comba carriers and light carriers all possessed a lot of resale value. It wasn't a bad idea for the Vandals to attempt to recoup their losses by selling their spoils.

The communications officer quickly received a reply. "Sir, the First Master has declined the offer. He intends to resist until the very end."

Major Verle was afraid of that, but he already expected their recalcitrance. It was one thing to let the Caged scurry back to their homes. While the gang was formidable in the right circumstances, in the end their main force consisted of untalented mech pilots and lower-end civilian-grade mechs. The threat they posed to the Flagrant Swordmaidens was minimal, especially now that they received an abject lesson on how outmatched they were against a military force.

The Vandals coordinated with the Swordmaidens in disabling and boarding the fleeing starships of the Masters of Combat. Vandal marksmen surgically struck the thrusters and engineering bays of the vulnerable ships, leaving them wide open to the Swordmaiden boarding parties entering the crippled vessels.

This turned out to be a tedious affair as the Masters of Combat split up all of their remaining assets. This wasn't enough to stop the ferocious Swordmaidens clad in exoskeleton armor. Though they encountered stiff resistance in the interior of the vessels, this was just the last gasp of a dying mercenary corps.



The Masters of Combat ceased to exist after this day. Though they left behind a lot of assets as well as a base back at Venidse, the core of their fighting strength was completely gone. The remains consist of a hollow shell that would never be able to bring back their past glory.

The Vandal mech pilots returned to their motherships with pride. Casualties remained limited throughout the engagement. Besides a few unlucky pilots, most returned without a scratch. This was one of their best battles in recent times, and a good start for what was about to come.

As Ves walked up to Chief Haine as the Shield of Hispania greeted the returning victors. Mech technicians whooped and laughed as the smiling mech pilots emerged from the their mostly-intact mechs.

If there was one thing Ves was glad for, it was that the battle hadn't been too strenuous on their side. With an advantage in numbers, training, discipline, coordination and more, the only way the alliance between the Caged and the Masters of Combat could eke out a victory was if their stealth shuttles succeeded in their surprise attack.

Though the desperate move ultimately failed, the attempt reminded Ves that he should never underestimate any opponents. Even though the Vandals retained the upper hand throughout the battle, it only took a single mistake to turn the tide.

"There are too many risks involved with battles."

If he hadn't taken the time to upgrade the detection capabilities of the fleet, it might have been the Vandals who would be running with their tails between their legs.

Ves felt apprehensive about the fickle nature of combat. His overactive imagination revisited the key moments of the battle and modeled alternative outcomes. In hindsight, many things could have gone wrong.

He had overlooked so many aspects that he admired the mech officers for keeping a cool head throughout the engagement. The measured leadership of Major Verle and the other mech officers had been crucial in responding to changes in the battlefield.

"I'm not cut out to lead men into battle." He shook his head. Ves wouldn't be able to see the forest from the trees. "I'll have to leave the strategizing to others."

Once Ves reached Chief Haine, he watched on as she hollered at some celebrating mech technicians to pick up their tools and go back to work. This was no time to take a day off!

"Vandals will be Vandals." Ves commented to the chief. "Let the lads have their fun. They deserve to celebrate their first clean battle."

The chief scowled. "You can't let off on these lazy bums. As long as I'm their supervisor, they're destined to be my slaves. Mech technicians are amazingly productive as long as you whip their backs now and then."

Ves was aware that the chief was only speaking in hyperbole. She didn't literally treat her mech technicians like slaves. However, out of every chief that Ves had met, Haine was the most serious about maximizing productivity.

They both observed the returning mechs in silence. Ves mainly wanted to observe the condition of the mechs. From what he saw so far, the Vandal mechs mostly incurred surface damage to their exterior and armor plating. Each mech pilot had been skilled enough to prevent the incoming long-ranged laser fire from focusing on a single section of their mechs.

"Looks like we'll mostly be fixing surface damage in the next couple of weeks."

Chief Haine nodded. "The only mechs that need disassembling are the Inheritor mechs. Those fragile light mechs sure break easily. The upside is

that fixing their internals is much easier than trying to fix a Hellcat that suffered a breach."

The internals of their hybrid space knight was at least an order of magnitude more complex than the elegant internal architecture of their light skirmisher. The latter was devoid of complicated components with punishing material requirements.

They talked shop for a while. Ves drew up the outline of a repair schedule, to which the chief had few objections. "Major Verle wants us to prioritize the task of preparing our landbound mechs for high-g conditions. It's extremely important we optimize all our landbound mechs for crushing gravities within two months."

"That's only doable if your mech technicians provide some guidance for my boys and girls. We don't have a single clue on how to strengthen the internals of our landbound mechs."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it. You just focus on making sure that our work proceeds on schedule. We can't afford to delay the plans our superiors have in mind."

At this moment, Chief Haine should not be aware of their true mission. Ves couldn't say anything more on this topic. He had a feeling that the time of disclosure would come by the time the Flagrant Swordmaidens crossed into the frontier. The Vandals deserved to know why they were leaving the war behind in order to chase after a fairy tale in the frontier.

"I really don't know what we're supposed to do with high-g compensation gear in the first place." Chief Haine scratched her head. "If the Mech Corps want to send us off to a Super Earth, then they could have sent out a mech regiment that's better prepared."

"Maybe the other mech regiments are already committed, and we're the only mech regiment around that's available."

"You mean we're the only ones around who the Mech Corps won't lose sleep over if they cut us off."

It also helped that the Flagrant Vandals were largely disposable. It wouldn't affect the Bright Republic at all if they got ambushed and ceased to exist the next day. Just like how the Masters of Combat was destined to disappear in the annals of history, so would the passing of the Vandals effect very little change.

"What is your perspective on this last battle?" Ves abruptly asked.

Chief Haine pointed back to him with a meaty finger. "You first."

"I thought ladies are supposed to go first."

"Hah! I'm hardly a lady! And don't distract me, I really want to hear what your big head has to say about this battle."

Ves thought about his answer. The truth was that he didn't really know what to think about it either, so he wanted to borrow the opinion of the chief to form the right perspective.

"Well, it's clear that the higher ups hadn't decided to annihilate the Masters of Combat just because they were conveniently close. There's a definite intention to do more than inflict a military defeat. I just hope our gains have paid off."

"Whatever the reason, I'm glad we fought right out of the gate." Haine remarked. "Ever since you folks returned from Harkensen I, you guys acted all stoic and depressed. No offense, but you needed to be loosened up. Now that everyone has returned to normal, I'm ready to dive head-first into the frontier!"

Everyone pretty much knew that their next destination was somewhere deep in the frontier. The gravity compensation gear took up too much space and couldn't be hidden under the observant eyes of the mech technicians.

This first battle was just an appetizer to the challenges that lay ahead of the Flagrant Swordmaidens. They would likely compete against other rivals along the way. Not all of them were despicable or had too much blood on their hands. Perhaps they might even bump into a mech outfit from their home state!

The thought of running down Brighter citizens just because they competed over the same prizes left a sour taste in his mouth. Ves had fully figured out why he felt so discomforted by the recent battle.

"Something fishy is afoot. If our opponents weren't Vesians, then there would have been a lot more discontent. Can we even say that we are still involved in the war?"

This issue had been bugging him ever since Miss Calabast shed open the veil of secrecy that shrouded this game from prying eyes. The thought of working his butt off for some elderly official who should have left his job for the younger generation rankled his mind. Was the hunt for the Starlight Megalodon really about the life-prolonging doses?

Ves blinked and shoved away those thoughts. Thinking about these doubts only increased his discontent. Right now, this did not fit with the celebratory mood of running through the entire fleet. Perhaps the Vandals would mistake him for a Vesian who mourned for the loss of the Masters of Combat!

"Pirates are your favorite outfits in Pirate Empires, right?"

"Uh huh. Why did you bring that up?"

"Oh, I figured you know how pirate outfits are run. Do you know why Lydia's Swordmaidens ignored our battle plans?"

Chief Haine smirked and crossed her arms. "That's easy. It's all about showing who's boss. From what I know about pirates, they don't like to play second fiddle. From what I've gathered, Commander Lydia probably didn't expect us to be so powerful or field so many mechs. We're the senior partner of this alliance. That's got to do a lot of harm to their self-esteem."

"So the Swordmaidens threw out a completely sound plan that was almost guaranteed to minimize our losses just because we hurt their egos?"

The reason sounded preposterous to Ves. His logical mind simply couldn't parse this excuse. Certainly, the deviation hadn't resulted into a cascade of failures, but if the Swordmaidens deviated once, they could certainly do it again. Resolving this issue should be a top priority to the Vandals.

#### **Chapter 635 Stealth Ambitions**

The Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens divided the spoils among themselves, with the former claiming the biggest share. This was what they deserved, as they fought harder and accomplished more.

The cost had been significant as well. The Vandals tallied the damage, and it became clear that while they hadn't lost a lot of men or mechs, some of their assets gained a lot of deep scars.

"It's frigging awful." Chief Engineer Avanaeon spat as Ves paid a visit to him down at the engineering bay. The chief read through scores of damage reports. The Shield of Hispania alone looked as if a gigantic tiger had ripped its molten claws throughout her entire hull. "We just fixed up the Shield's armor belt at Harkensen III. Now we're halfway back to square one. Damn the major, a combat carrier isn't a tower shield to be flaunted around whenever someone shoots at us!"

The other engineers and nodded in agreement. While the mech pilots and mech technicians celebrated the clean victory, the ship crewmembers all seemed disgruntled at the decision to put the combat carriers at risk. Just

because they had been designed to take a beating didn't mean they needed to be deployed as supersized knight mechs.

A carrier was a mothership. A hive for mechs to come home to roost. Conventional doctrine called for carriers to stay as far away from the fighting as possible. Heavily-armored combat carriers provided some exceptions to the rule, but they only applied in special situations.

"Well, it's better to lose some armor plating than some lives." Ves replied. Though he sympathised with the enormous workload the ship caretakers had to go through, he was on the side of Major Verle for once. "Lives are much more precious than inanimate objects. The combat carriers will live."

"I don't disagree with you." Avanaeon waved his hands in emphasis. "It's just that fixing this battle damage is going to take another stint in a drydock. Will the higher ups agree to that?"

"According to what I know, that's extremely unlikely. We are bound for the frontier and we won't let anything hinder us. You'll have to fix up the Shield while we're on the move, most likely."

The only times they could go out and fix the armor plating was to go out in space while the fleet transitioned out of FTL and entered a cooldown cycle. Perhaps their ships would linger in the material dimensions for a while longer in order to mine some asteroids, but other than that they needed to hurry through the frontier as fast as possible.

Ves understood their pain, because he had to live with the same logistical constraints. There would be no respite after they departed the Harkensen System. They would navigate towards the frontier and cross the invisible dividing line that marked the end of civilized space.

They would find no succor in the untamed stars that lay beyond. Pirates, sandmen and other threats made their home there. What space stations

existed there were ramshackle constructions that provided inferior services to the worst examples of mankind. The Swordmaidens may be welcome in such pirate ports, but the Vandals would be greeted as enemies.

No matter how many people referred to them as pirates, the truth was that they were firmly fighting on behalf of a state. They did so openly and took up the mantle of responsibility, however threadbare it appeared.

This mantle was an anathema to pirates and every other kind of scum in the frontier. No matter where they traveled, every frontiersmen would regard them at interlopers as best, and mortal enemies as worst.

This was also why the alliance with Lydia's Swordmaidens was so crucial to the Vandals. They were intrinsically part of the frontier and knew all of the major players. Their connections with the pirates and other organizations that made themselves home at this chaotic region of space would save them a lot of grief.

"They say that a delegation of Lydia's Swordmaidens are on their way to our ship soon." Avanaeon remarked. "Half of my men are drooling at the sight. The recordings some of us managed to obtain from the galactic net sure makes them out as.. Exotic."

Ves had glanced at the same images. "They look tribal. As if humanity has regressed by a dozen ages. They sure like to show off their martial prowess."

Their clothing revealed much about their culture. It was undeniably based around personal strength. Commander Lydia stood at the top, while the ranks further down were based on which Swordmaiden had the biggest fist.

Such a crude method of determining their hierarchy worked up to a point. If the Swordmaidens consisted more than several thousand women, then the limitations of this method became increasingly apparent.



Not that it mattered. The Swordmaidens seem content at their current numbers.

"By the way, Larkinson, I appreciate the social call, but you didn't drop by just to chat, right? I know you. If you aren't working, you're doing something that's related to your work. You have to learn to ease up, man."

Ves chuckled a bit. This wasn't the first time someone accused him of being a workaholic. "I'm hardly the mech designer you are making me out for. Don't I join your little game sessions every once in a while?"

"That doesn't count. We all know you're only present because you can squeeze some secrets out of us. We don't mind, of course. We do the same to you."

"Hey, it's not all about that. I'm having fun as well with the game. Pirate Empires has taught me a lot."

Even though it was just a silly game, it had given him a taste of what every kind of outfit had to struggle with.

Pirate groups needed to keep themselves afloat at the edge of civilization.

Treasure hunters dug up at least nine duds before they came across something good enough to pay off their debts.

Mercenary corps had to deal with the fickleness of the battlefield, sometimes choosing to abandon the mission despite receiving a black mark on their record.

Rebel movements only grew when a state was in discord. If the government was too competent in ruling over their territory, then the rebels had no choice but to inflict their own brand of terror.

"A game is just a game. It's not an accurate reflection of reality." Avanaeon stated. "Look at Lydia's Swordmaidens for example. Even though they look

like a bunch of pirates gone native, it takes a lot of talent to grow them to their current heights. Commander Lydia is not a simple person."

Ves nodded in agreement. Someone who survived and thrived in the frontier for decades had to be exceptionally savvy. "That reminds me, I need your assistance in a number of side projects of mine. Have you heard about the upgraded sensor arrays I've installed in some of the Inheritor mechs?"

"Yup. Impressive work, from what I heard. It's amazing that you managed to design this module that's completely compatible with the Inheritor model. Others need at least a week to come up with a viable prototype."

"I'm used to working in a hurry, and the sensor arrays aren't exactly my best work. I'll have to tweak their design and optimize them so they'll be able to last longer than a couple of weeks. However, that's something I'll take care of myself. What I want you to do is to install similar sensor arrays across the hull of our ships. The more, the better."

"That isn't something I can decide on my own." Avanaeon frowned. "I heard they're fragile and cost a lot. They only work against some categories of stealth technology and they're practically sending out a beacon in space when they are active."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Those drawbacks are trivial compared to what we get in return. Sure, the sensor arrays can't counteract every application of stealth, but we are at the furthest reaches of the galactic rim. We're one step away from the frontier. I doubt we'll encounter anything beyond the rudimentary level."

"Even so, installing even one of them on the hulls of our combat carriers will require Captain Rakeshir's agreement. The issue can't be brought up likely."

"Well, just remember the time we got screwed by the Frosty Meteors, and think of what the Masters of Combat might have pulled off as well. Stealth

technology is much more ubiquitous than we think, and I can't rest easily unless our ships gain some new eyes."

"I'll do my best on this matter, but Captain Rakeshir and Major Verle have the final word."

"I understand."

The reason why Ves was adamant about this issue was because he ran through the logs of the sensor arrays after the battle was over. While they managed to pick up the stealth shuttles from a couple of hundred kilometers away, the sensor arrays also picked up another, fainter presence.

This one was hundreds of thousands of kilometers away. While this distance was far enough to pose no threat to him, the fact that something else was hiding near the battlefield deeply unsettled him. Was it something from the Masters of Combat? A scouting craft dispatched by the Reinaldians? Or maybe something connected to Calabast?

Whatever the case, the presence had only been there for a moment before it started to move out of range of active sensors. Ves had the feeling they might be stalked by this hidden craft even now.

"What other projects do you want to collaborate with?" Avanaeon pressed when he noticed Ves trailing off.

"Ah, this one's more difficult. I heard the salvage teams managed to recover reasonably intact fragments of the remains of the stealth shuttles."

"That's true. We've dumped them into a pile down in the cargo hold for now. Slagged or not, there are some people who will pay a lot of money for scrap like those. You can use them to calibrate your stealth detection systems. Do you need some?"

"I need more than a couple of scraps. I've been down there and I think we've collected enough fragments to reconstruct a functional stealth shuttle."

"What?!" The engineer became surprised. "You want to cobble together a working stealth shuttle? Are you out of your mind?! Do you understand the technical challenges of doing so? It's one thing to assemble a shuttle out of a stack of pristine parts. It's another matter entirely when you think we only managed to recover a pile of broken parts, many of which are only good for recycling."

"Come on. Think about what we can do with a working stealth shuttle. The frontier is a dangerous place. The option to sneak past a well-guarded perimeter instead of attacking it head-on should be a boon that can save a lot of lives. While I have confidence in my skills, I'm not a specialist in shuttle designs. I need someone who knows their way around this craft."

"It's a pipe dream, Larkinson. The fragments are too sporadic. Even if our boys managed to crumple seven shuttles at once, there's really too few pieces left."

"We don't need to reconstruct the original shuttle. The internal structure can be whatever we want. The key is to figure out the principles behind its stealth system and to replicate a passable imitation of its stealth plating. In other words, I'm not aiming to rebuild a stealth shuttle, but rather create a new one entirely."

The project intrigued the chief engineer. He started to get around to the idea. "I don't have the time to help you out. I'm already swamped with overseeing the repairs to the armor belt of the Shield. Still, I'll drop by when my shift is over."

"That's good enough. I hope we can complete our shuttle in time."

Ves left the engineering bay with a smile. With the chief engineer in his pocket, he had no doubt this project would succeed. While it was true that he wanted to create a stealth shuttle in order to strengthen the Vandals, the true reason for this sudden drive was to develop his own understanding of modern stealth technology.

"If the central database won't let me study stealth technology, then I'll just have to perform my own research."

### **Chapter 636 Shadow Force**

Ves had the tendency to be driven by obsession whenever he put his mind on a major project. This mostly manifested whenever he began to design a virtual or a physical mech design. He ignored every other matter in favor of solving the puzzle pieces brought in front of him. He loved these moments, because he felt as if he performed his calling.

Right now, his latest obsession concerned stealth technology. His fears about their use by his enemies and the thought of mastering this technology for his own ends drove him on a path to no return. He could halt his progress, set it aside for a time, but he would never be truly content until he reached the promised end.

As Ves stepped back inside his office, he sat down behind his desk and unlocked the top drawer. Two crude hand-sized gadgets rested inside. Ves retrieved both of them and placed them on top of his desk.

Ves smirked at his handiwork for the last couple of days.

He had gone through a lot of trouble to construct these two gadgets. He spent hours on adapting their capabilities into a slim and portable form factor for both devices.

He flicked the activation button for the first device. A horrible feeling of static washed over his body, and his terminal projection turned unstable before

winking out entirely. When Ves tried to activate his comm, the wrist device acted as if it had gone completely dead.

"It still works." He muttered and flicked another button that shut it down.

The gadget was an inspired creation of Ves. Inspired by Calabast's jamming device, Ves wanted to obtain something similar. He was amazed at the original device's effectiveness despite its compact package.

That led to the creation of his first homebrew jamming device. Ves skimmed over several technical documents from the central database for inspiration. While he only had access to technical specifications of jamming modules sized for mechs, he still managed to derive their principles with the help of his existing base knowledge.

Once he understood the principles, it wasn't hard for him to design an imitation scaled for humans. The result was a working jamming device that was smaller but much less powerful than the real deal. It could effectively block all manner of signals within a range of a couple of meters.

It was a passable first attempt. While it hardly matched Calabast's more refined jamming device, it still did the job. Ves had no doubt that he could refine his initial attempt into something smaller and better if he spent enough time on this project.

"Still, this isn't the only project on my mind."

The jamming device was useful, but the utility of his next creation was much more valuable to him. He carefully placed the jamming device back in the draw and shoved the second device to the center of his desk. He pressed its activation button, causing its surface components to unfold into an array of antennas.

Another wave washed over his body. Compared to the jarring sensation of being shocked by static electricity, this one was more subtle. The output of his second gadget wasn't meant to disrupt signals and transmissions.

Instead, it was meant to detect invisible presences.

Ves stood up from his desk and pulled out his multiscanner from his toolbelt. He activated his scanner and held it out towards his second gadget. He started off pointing his multiscanner right in front of the active device, and slowly stepped backwards until his back bumped against the bulkhead of the compartment.

"Damn. It's worse than last time."

This meant his second device had degraded due to its shoddy construction. After studying the readings from his multiscanner, he figured out its effective range was no more than five meters.

"Five meters of effective stealth detection. While it's better than nothing, that won't help me if an infiltrator is aiming a gun at me from a distance."

The second device was his attempt at creating a compact human-sized stealth detector. The original mech-sized sensor array was already delicate and finicky. Shrinking it by at least two orders of magnitude introduced many complications. Its effective range dwindled from thousands of kilometers to only a handful of meters.

The main problem with these gadgets was that their power supply was woefully insufficient. The larger mech-sized modules could tap into the mech's central power supply at any time. These handheld objects wouldn't be able to do so because Ves wasn't in the habit of carrying a portable power reactor everywhere he went. He had to fashion some batteries for the devices, and what power they eked out was woefully insufficient to the task at hand.

Without access to better batteries, Ves wouldn't be able to upgrade the capabilities of his two latest gadgets.

"It's fine, though. After some refinement, they'll be good enough to earn a permanent place on my toolbelt."

He pursued these pet projects while he thought about his approach to reconstructing a stealth shuttle. Compared to the challenge of creating a jamming device and a stealth detector, figuring out the principles of stealth technology was a much larger challenge.

The chief engineer was right to doubt the viability of this project. Both of them were burdened with a huge workload, and sinking so many free hours into this pipedream may not be the best use of their time.

Ves didn't care.

"The mech designers and mech technicians don't need any hand holding by this point."

While it was true that he could always solve the problems the others had difficulty with, they needed to stand on their own. Ves increased his dependence on delegation to take care of mundane matters. He became proficient at figuring out which issues needed his personal attention and which problems could be left to his subordinates.

If Ves delegated hard enough, he could easily create some holes in his schedules that he could devote to his pet projects.

"I'll certainly need a lot of time to figure out how to build a stealth shuttle."

It helped that Ves had worked with a primitive iteration of stealth technology. Some of his old virtual mech designs incorporated very real instances of stealth plating. Back then, the principles behind this technology were crude but understandable to any Apprentice Mech Designer.



Hundreds of years of ceaseless progress and refinement had left these crude applications of stealth tech in the dust. The difference between old and modern stealth tech was as vast as comparing a horse-drawn carriage to a modern flight-capable aircar.

"The leap is too big."

If the evolution had been smaller or more gradual, then Ves could still leverage his old knowledge to construct a new framework in his mind. That was out of the question now. The differences between the generations was so vast that it might as well be a new development field.

Modern stealth technology accomplished more than fooling the eyes and ears. It could suppress a much wider range of signals in the electromagnetic spectrum. It could block sound and vibrations. It could counteract gravitic sensors, basically fooling even gravity itself in a limited fashion.

"Hiding a multi-ton mech or shuttle from powerful sensors and scanners can't be done by snapping your fingers. It takes a huge amount of ingenuity and cross-discipline collaboration to come up with something that actually works on mechs."

The technical challenges to develop a working example of stealth technology was enough to fill the storage of a data chip.

It was a good thing that the salvaging parties recovered some debris of the stealth shuttles. Even if not a single component was complete, Ves could still scan their composition and derive the underlying principles from what remained.

It was like possessing an encrypted textbook on stealth technology. Cracking the code required a lot of work, but that was infinitely easier than trying to reinvent one of the most complex wheels that Ves had ever encountered.

Pulling in Chief Avanaeon as his unwitting assistant allowed Ves to draw strength from the chief engineer's considerable knowledge base. With more minds at work, the decryption process would go a lot faster.

His ultimate goal wasn't to create a working stealth shuttle. His ambitions were much more encompassing than that. Even though stealth technology was restricted knowledge, who could blame him if he figured it out without anyone else's assistance?

Once the Mech Corps released him from his service, Ves would truly be able to leverage his gains.

There was only a single snag in his plan.

"Stealth tech is prohibited by almost every state. Only state actors are permitted to wear stealth suits or pilot stealth craft."

This basically meant that he couldn't flaunt his stealth creations or put them on the market.

"No matter. I can still fabricate some mechs and hand them over to the Avatars of Myth."

Expanding, strengthening and increasing the Avatars of Myth would be one of his highest priorities once he returned to civilian life. Ves had to admit that he had become charmed to the strength of the Flagrant Vandals. The mech regiment was able to avoid many problems that could hamper a normal mech outfit just by virtue of its status and actual strength.

Ves recently aspired to possess the same kind of strength! With hundreds of landbound and spaceborn mechs at his disposal, hardly anyone in the Bright Republic could pose a threat to him! Cultivating a hidden force of assassin mechs would also allow him to take the offensive without incurring greater repercussions.

"It feels good to hit back for a change."

Now that he thought about it, it might be better to allocate his stealth mechs to another force. The Avatars of Myth were meant to attract publicity, showing the galaxy what his products were capable of when utilized at their full potential.

Stealth mechs worked best if they worked in the shadows. Connecting them to a public outfit like the Avatars of Myth was detrimental to their effectiveness. All of his enemies would see them coming.

"I'll have to establish another outfit. It's best if nobody can connect it to my identity. Maybe they can even pretend to be pirates or something."

Ves would be able to wield this shady outfit to do his dirty work. Anyone who reached the annals of power inevitably accrued enemies. He hadn't forgotten his old friends such as Michael Dumont, Vincent Ricklin and the rest of his scornful family.

Before, he had been fearful of their power and influence. Lacking connections and unable to leverage as much wealth, Ves had no choice but to become their punching bags.

All of this would change once he developed his own force of assassins and saboteurs. While recruiting capable and trustworthy mech pilots was still a huge issue, having the mechs in place at least opened up the door.

"It would have been perfect if I can recruit veterans from the Flagrant Vandals."

This was one hope that would remain unfulfilled.

"I'll have to recruit loyal mech pilots through another channel."

Others had managed to do so, so what stopped Ves from accomplishing the same? He would probably have to turn to someone else for help, or rely on the System to figure out a solution on his own.

All of these plans might have sounded fanciful, but Ves worked towards another end when he crafted these intentions. Having been exposed to some of the underground that ruled society from the shadows, Ves no longer saw it as a scary and incomprehensible abyss.

He began to develop an ambition to enter the Nyxian Gap. He wanted to address an issue that had long laid dormant in his mind.

He wanted to find his persecuted father and obtain some answers from him. Ves hungered for answers. About the System. About what happened to his mother. About the conspiracy his father became entangled with. More than anything, Ves wanted to dispel his ignorance and help out his parents.

"My father wants me to forget about him and live for myself, but how can I do so?"

### **Chapter 637 Daughters of the Frontier**

Establishing his own shadow force enabled Ves to punch above his weight. It also allowed him entry into the darker part of the galaxy. He could accomplish both without tarnishing his reputation.

In the light, Ves was talented and promising mech designer. He ran his own company that had grown to the point of selling his mechs all over the Komodo Star Sector. In his free time, he dabbled with treasure hunting expedition, but all in all he was only as shady as the average businessman.

In the dark, Ves or whatever pseudonym he decided to adopt would become a hidden player in a game that few people were aware of in the first place. His shadow force granted him the right to participate in such games and thereby

enable him to achieve goals that would have been impossible for his public identity to accomplish.

"Most people think society is ruled by those in the light. I would argue that the real power brokers are the players who prefer to lurk in the dark."

Ves couldn't offer any solid proof to his assertions. However, the events he witnessed so far had been so impactful that his perspective of human society couldn't be divorced from this dualistic perspective.

"At the heart of it all, the power brokers are all competing in pursuit of longevity."

Nothing else mattered compared to living a couple of hundred years longer. Doubtlessly many people went through untold extremes in order to obtain such a chance.

"Well, enough dreaming about my ambitions. While it's important to know what I'm aiming for in my life, I still need to get back to work."

The engineers had it worse this time. Fixing the combat carriers of their surface damage was a monumental endeavor that could never be completed in a month or two. This made their journey into the frontier more precarious, but Ves would rather ride with a damaged ship than to have less mechs at his disposal.

As Ves returned to his work, he tallied the damaged mechs and drafted individual repair plans for those that needed them. He delegated responsibility for fixing up the lightly-damaged mechs to his deputies.

"Patching up the spaceborn mechs is only a secondary priority at this point. Our first priority remains readying our landbound mech for high-g deployments."

Ves faced a lot of issues with this responsibility. The Vandals utilized so many different mech models with their own unique customizations that Ves practically had to draft an individual modification scheme for over two-hundred-and-fifty landbound mechs.

Every single attempt was like designing a variant. Even if he was a pretty good mech designer, designing that many variants in the span of a month was inhuman!

Still, just because the problem sounded daunting didn't mean Ves had no way of solving it. The first solution was to simplify the matter and categorize similar mechs into their own sub-categories. Ves would only have to put his full efforts on developing a modification scheme for only one of the mechs.

He would then dump the scheme in the laps of his deputies and order them to adjust them to the other mechs that shared the same base model. "I've been hogging so many duties that Mercator and Trozin are having it easy. It's about time for them to sweat on my behalf."

This wasn't an easy decision to make. Ves held the utmost confidence in his own skills, and he was never truly satisfied with the work of his lessers. Their current capabilities simply didn't garner any respect from him. Yet if Ves wanted to complete his work in time, he had no choice but to lower his standards and spread the workload to his lessers.

"Maybe they won't be able to produce the best work, but it should be good enough for the Vandals."

That was what mattered the most right now. Necessity and lack of time forced Ves to loosen up from his constant refrain of delivering the highest quality possible.

The approach went against his instincts. Ves would never tolerate such sloppiness in his own company. Unfortunately, reality wasn't so kind to grant him the time to slowly work his way through his problems.

"Speaking of problems, the Swordmaiden delegation is about to arrive."

Ves didn't know what to think about Lydia's Swordmaidens. Were they pirates or intelligence operatives masquerading as pirates?

"They certainly acted the part during the last battle."

According to Chief Haine, much of their actions could be chalked to posturing. They didn't really put their mind on this battle, but instead acted to improve their standing in front of the Vandals. Pirates thrived on reputation to a much greater degree because they couldn't depend on the law to protect them on their behalf.

Frightening or intimidating their peers was a survival mechanism to them. Just like how Ves relied on building up a reputation for quality to survive in the market, Lydia's Swordmaidens relied on their reputation for ferocity to fend off any bottom feeders with ill intentions.

Ves couldn't lie to himself. He was curious about the Swordmaidens. For all intents and purposes, they were probably the most amiable pirates he would ever encounter.

He arrived at the shuttle hangar bay at the appointed time. The majority of the servicemen aboard the Shield of Hispania already arrived early and stood at ranks. The Vandals decided not to roll out the dress uniforms because other threats could always pop up in the Remoss System.

"This is just an attempt to get a feel for each other." Chief Haine commented as Ves found his way to her side. "It's no secret that some bigwigs forced us to work together with the Swordmaidens. We don't have anything in common, so everyone is in a hurry to get to know each other."

Ves nodded. "This marriage is a little too forced. What happened in the last battle can't happen again."

A shuttle coated in the outfit colors of light green and blue slipped through the energy screen covering the open hangar entrance. The craft looked beaten but robust, and Ves instantly spotted the marks of frequent patchwork repairs.

The side of the craft carried a faded emblem of the Swordmaidens. It depicted a screaming woman in knight's armor holding a two-handed sword aloft against a backdrop of stars. The image it conveyed was as simple as a rock. Nobody would be able to mistake their identity or ideals.

When the shuttle touched down on the deck, the hatch slowly opened up.

First to leave were four serious-looking Swordmaidens in semi-powered heavy combat armor. Though not as strong as exoskeleton armor, these suits performed much better in confined spaces. They all looked like they had plenty of experience in boarding enemy craft or invading enemy bases.

The second wave of women consisted of what appeared to be their officers. Every woman looked tall and strong, unnaturally so but not unusual in this day and age. Body modification was so ubiquitous in this day and age that even pirates had access to these kinds of services. Plenty of hack-job doctors made themselves home in various pirate stations.

These ones looked like they went the extra mile though. Some replaced their eyes with those of a cat, while others exhibited subtle scales over their skin.

Many Vandals held their breath in shock.

"Hybrids."

Ves would have mistaken them for citizens of the Coman Federation with their embrace of alien genes. While genetic modification was something to be frowned upon, he had long shed his naivete about the matter. Those in power



needed to be better than the common man, and mixing your own genome with superior alien traits was the most expedient way of stretching or breaking the human limit.

Even so, most people in the upper class had the decency to hide their modifications and retain their baseline human appearances. The rare exceptions such as the transhuman crazies from the Coman Federation would be kept at a healthy distance in order to avoid polluting the minds of average people.

It was a good thing the Vandals had already been warned. Besides the shock of encountering alien features in the flesh, the excitement quickly subsided. It helped that the Swordmaiden officers hadn't resorted to more extreme deviations.

"They're women, after all." Chief Haine commented.

The Swordmaiden officers formed a line of their own and eyed the Vandals with challenging expressions. Compared to the functional burgundy-and-black uniforms of the Vandals, the Swordmaidens adorned themselves with barbaric-looking garments made out of exobeast pelts.

Reptilian, mammalian, covered with fur or scales and accompanied by a riot of colors, the Vandals struggled to find the meaning behind the clothes.

Ves saw what many others couldn't. His sixth sense rippled when he focused on the clothes. Each Swordmaiden invested a significant amount of emotion in those garments. Their shapes and colors didn't matter as much as what wearing them represented.

"Do you know what's going on with those clothes, chief?"

"From what I heard, the Swordmaidens consider it a rite of passage to hunt an exobeast on an untamed planet." Chief Haine replied. "They skin the pelts by

themselves and fashion them into clothes. That's why some of them look cruder than others."

He understood the sentiment that came from this tradition. He felt much the same whenever he handcrafted a mech of his own design. Those women put their heart in this ritual. The fiercer the animal, the prouder the women wore the pelts fashioned from their kills.

The last person who emerged from the shuttle was the only woman who didn't wear any armor or outlandishly barbaric animal skins. Commander Lydia herself walked down, her greyish-black hair swaying in the air.

Despite her generic military-style suit, she looked as formidable as any other mech commander. Ves detected the same air of command he often sensed from Major Verle. This was a woman used to leadership. Different from Verle's professional restraint, the Swordmaiden leader wasn't shy about flaunting her strength.

Pirates and servicemen. The two groups couldn't be any more different.

"Daughters of the frontier, present arms!"

The Swordmaidens all drew the giant swords from their backs and held them pointed upwards in front of their faces.

"Reverse grip!"

Before any Vandal could figure out what was going on, the Swordmaiden officers swung their blades around until their faces faced the pommel of their weapons.

"Baptise this deck!"

Each of the women uttered a warcry as they thrust their swords into the hangar bay deck!

Some of the Vandals attempted to warn them. The deck of the hangar bay was rated to withstand crash landings from shuttles and mechs. An ordinary sword would never be able to pierce the thick alloy surface!

Yet the Swordmaidens managed to accomplish the impossible. Their valiant swords hit some resistance, but their physical strength combined with the unparalleled sharpness of their blades allowed them to thrust in their weapons until they had reached a finger's length through the deck!

The incomprehensible act had stolen the breath of every Vandal! Could the Swordmaidens still be considered human? What was this inhuman level of strength?

Ves, Chief Haine and a couple of others recognized the crux lay in the material composition of the swords. Though they looked like plain steel greatswords, their actual worth was probably measured in millions of credits. Each sword was a treasure of forging and craftsmanship.

Major Verle tried hard not to look displeased at the unexpected act of vandalizing the deck. Fixing the damage was no small matter. "Commander Lydia. It would behoove your ladies if they keep their swords in their scabbards. We don't want any misunderstandings to occur."

"My Swordmaidens know what to do." Commander Lydia gruffly answered as she stared at the major like a lioness eyeing her prey. When she briefly shifted her gaze to the other Vandals, her expression became discontented. "Your men needed a reminder of what we are capable of. We have found that many incidents can be avoided as long as we demonstrate a taste of how we fight."

Commander Lydia practically insinuated that the Vandals, or at least the male portion of them, were a bunch of lustful beasts. Tensions increased as many Vandals felt mildly offended, but Major Verle quickly waved his men to calm.

"We have prepared a sumptuous banquet for your arrival. Please follow me to the dining room."

The daughters of the frontier wordlessly advanced, sparing very little glances at the other Vandals. It was as if none of them earned any respect in their eyes.

### **Chapter 638 Mayra**

Lydia's Swordmaidens appeared horribly out of place with the elegant, wood-paneled dining room. The earthen, classy interior clashed violently against their colorful exobeast garments.

Nonetheless, the Swordmaidens remained relatively composed. They showed no signs of unfamiliarity with formal settings. Though the Flagrant Vandals wasn't the strictest mech regiment of the Mech Corps, they could be very traditional when they were serious.

The dining room hosted several large square dining tables. For clarity, the Swordmaidens were invited to sit on one side of the table, while the Vandals claimed the other side.

When the Swordmaidens were about to take their seats, they first detached the scabbards from their backs. Each scabbard incorporated a small antigrav module that allowed them to float in the air. The Swordmaidens placed them behind the backrest of their chairs, keeping them in easy reach and allowing them to draw their blades in an instant if necessary.

Not a single Vandal had the guts to request them to leave behind their swords. Many servicemen regretted leaving their backup pistols in the armory.

Commander Lydia and Major Verle took their places at the head of the main table. As soon as everyone took their places, the major stood up.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Vandals and Swordmaidens. We appear very different at first glance. Ordinarily, we should be facing each other on the

battlefield. Yet circumstances have made us strange bedfellows. While I am aware that many of you have doubts, answers will soon be forthcoming. Suffice to say, I can think of very few combinations that are both flexible and formidable in battle! Together, we have wiped out the Masters of Combat from history!"

That gave both of them a lot of pride. If there was anything that lifted up the Vandals, it was a clean victory against a formidable opponent. Even the Swordmaidens felt pleased at this achievement.

"Despite our successes, many of you harbor questions. Questions about our mission. Questions on why we are heading to the frontier. Questions why the Swordmaidens and the Vandals need to combine our strength in the first place. Answers to all of these questions will soon be forthcoming. Due to the extremely confidential nature of our mission, the briefing will have to wait until we cross into the frontier and disable all of our quantum entanglement nodes aboard our ships, with the exception of our flagships. These extreme measures should already underscore the importance of our mission."

A lot of Vandals looked mildly alarmed when their commanding officer informed them that they would disable most of their quantum entanglement nodes. This was because the process of shutting them off was irreversible! Pulling the plug on the hardware would turn the machinery into an extremely expensive piece of scrap! These nodes communicated instantly across countless light-years through the interaction of matched pairs of particles.

Creating these matches pairs could only be done in a lab or a specialized production facility. Not a single mech regiment possessed the capability of producing new pairs of entangled particles to replace the ones that fizzled out. Basically, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens willingly cut themselves off from the galactic net. Though they left two lifelines intact, Ves imagined that the

remaining nodes would be put under heavy guard, to the extent of denying routine use of the nodes.

The impact of this announcement to the Vandals was profound. The idea of heading into the frontier with only a tenuous connection to civilized space was as frightening as crossing a cable over an endless chasm on foot. Only a single misstep was required to throw them into a fall they might never recover from! What kind of mission required such an extreme level of discretion?

Verle did not let his subordinates stew over this declaration too much. He silently clapped, causing numerous bots to float into the dining room and drop off the dishes to the hungry Vandals and Swordmaidens.

"Hmm!" Ves sniffed with a smile. "Finally, some real food! I'm sick and tired of those meals synthesized from nutrient packs."

A small piece of lizard-like leg had been served in front of him. The meat was topped with grey sauce and was surrounded with purple garnish that smelled like fresh ocean. Ves didn't recognize any of the ingredients, but it didn't matter too much. Every exomeat and exoplant safe for human consumption tended to taste the same after sampling enough of them. Human taste buds could be surprisingly lazy in some ways.

"Tastes like chicken." Chief Avanaeon muttered as he chewed his lizard leg like a piece of gum. "Correction, it tastes like a chewy piece of chicken."

Everyone from the technical branch of the Vandals sat around their own table. Ves, Chief Avanaeon, Chief Haine and a couple of other familiar figures faced a smaller number of unknown women.

Disconcertingly, the Swordmaidens sitting across the table looked no different from the Swordmaiden mech officers. Even their support personnel possessed the ability to chop someone up with their swords.

As the most sociable among the Vandals, Chief Haine broke the ice. "How's the food?"

"Adequate. Not as good as the meat we have harvested from our own kills."

Okay.

"So did all of you grow up in the frontier?"

The Swordmaidens nodded. The oldest woman among them who looked as if she came from the same generation as Lydia spoke up. "We know you civilized folk think the frontier is a wasteland of alien and environmental threats. You are right to think so. None of our planets have been subjected to the fancy terraforming you take for granted. The frontier isn't referred to as the untamed stars for nothing."

"How do you manage to live on those planets in the first place?"

"By the thread, mostly. By relying on our filtration systems, our hydroponic farms and our oxygen recyclers. Nearly every settlement is based around a life support system. Breathing air and drinking water is thousands of times more valuable there. We have all grown up to respect and fear the planet we call home. To many of us, leaving them is a dream."

Her eyes grew fervent and she threw a glance at Commander Lydia in the distance. Obviously many of the Swordmaidens owed everything to the woman who founded her own pirate gang.

They soon introduced each other. The oldest Swordmaiden turned out to be their head designer!

"You can call me Mayra." She spoke calmly. "We don't tend to use last names. They have no meaning among us. Every Swordmaiden is a sister."

Ves looked interested upon learning she was a mech designer. He quickly introduced himself before asking something that burned in his mind. "Are you the designer of the Misty Slasher?"

"It is one of my designs."

"I see. Your design is very capable. The implementation of minibooters has doubled its effectiveness in spaceborn combat."

"Many of our Swordmaiden mech pilots don't like to wield a rifle. They're fussy and demand a lot more maintenance. Many times, our mechs are stranded on a planet for weeks. Running out of ammunition or batteries happens far too often during those times. The reliability of a plain alloy sword is what allows us to endure."

"That's on land. What about in space? Melee weapons are far less popular in spaceborn combat."

Mayra snorted. "Maybe in civilized space, that is so, but in the frontier it makes no difference. Navigating in the frontier is fraught with peril. If we are being chased by the sandmen, we could be driven far away from the stars we are familiar with. Without knowing the lay of the stars, we might not be able to encounter a port or trading settlement for months on end. Those fancy rifles we brought will break or run out of ammunition soon enough."

The Swordmaiden mech designer described a harsh life. Each sentence painted a bleak picture of living on the edge. Perhaps their ships were one oxygen recycling system away from suffocating in space. Mayra's design philosophy bore the scars of living in a region where safe harbor was nonexistent and where sandmen and other pirate scum was constantly out to get them. Ves widened his eyes at the woman once he realized an important fact.

"Please excuse me if I'm rude, but could I ask how far you've advanced?"



"I'm a Journeyman Mech Designer. I advanced more than a decade ago."

Not only Ves, but the chiefs sitting next to him all looked impressed. There were lots of mech designers struggling to make Apprentice or Journeyman back in civilized space. So many men and women have failed despite growing up in the most prosperous human Age, yet one single frontierswoman who probably never attended a school in her life managed to reach Journeyman anyway.

Was there any justice in life?!

"I-I-I see." Ves stuttered, having lost control for a bit. His respect for Mayra shot up tremendously. "No wonder the Misty Slasher is such a stable mech model. I've studied the battle footage several times and I'm amazed at how the minibooters have never malfunctioned even once! How did you come to be such a good mech designer when you.."

"Grew up in the frontier?" Mayra smirked sardonically at Ves. "Kid, there's more than one way to become a mech designer than attend one of your elitist mech universities. Haven't you heard about mentorships and apprenticeships? You'd be surprised at how many mech designers are driven from civilized space. Commander Lydia happened to sponsor my apprenticeship to one of these exiles when I showed a lot of promise in tinkering with machines. Meeting my mentor was the best day of my life. I can't thank Lydia enough for introducing me to the old pervert."

As Mayra chuckled to herself, Ves grew curious about who could have mentored her into becoming a Journeyman. From her wording, he ruled out the possibility of her teacher being Master Mech Designer.

That possibility would have been ridiculous regardless. Each Master was a treasure of humanity. Even Master Null of the Leemar Institute of Technology stopped his flight once he reached the Komodo Star Sector.

"My mentor is one of the greatest mech designers in our region of the frontier. His talents might not be the equal of your impressive Masters, but there is hardly any better mech designer that can design a great mech with so little means. Among the pirates and the outcasts of the frontier, his name ranks among the top of their community."

"Who is he?" Ves asked with bated breath.

"He is Skull Architect Jimenez."

This caused another ripple of shock among the Vandals at the table. Skull Architect Jimenez! While his name inspired awe and respect in the frontier, the Komodo Star Sector mainly associated his name with fear!

"Isn't he the.. eccentric who incorporates human bones in his mechs?"

Ves almost called the Skull Architect a madman, but thought better of it at the last second. After all, Mayra hadn't grown up hearing horror stories about the promising mech designer turned serial killer! Skull Architect Jimenez earned his moniker by his crazy beliefs that mechs inherited a shadow of the soul that lingered in human remains.

Supposedly, Jimenez was one of those mech designers that had been driven mad in his relentless pursuit to uncover the secrets behind the X-Factor!

What would Jimenez think if he got wind of what Ves had accomplished? Perhaps his skull would decorate the Skull Architect's latest mech!

Mayra recognized the expression of fear on his face. She boldly laughed.

"Don't be a scaredy-cat, kid. The only thing you need to be afraid of old pervert is his grabby hands. It took me years to unlearn my instinct of drawing my sword upon feeling his wrinkled hands brushing against my body. His days of killing people and embedding their bones in his mechs are long past."

Ves took those words with a grain of salt. Of course his protege would defend him. It wasn't as if she was one of the many thousands who ended up missing to fuel his mad experiments!

Up to this date, the MTA still maintained the bounty issued upon the Skull Architect's head!

### **Chapter 639 Skull Architec**

If Ves ignored her giant sword and her exobeast clothes, Mayra looked and spoke no different from a genuine Journeyman Mech Designer. However, Ves simply couldn't ignore what her veneer of civility covered up. She was not only a daughter of the frontier, she also learned her craft from a mech designer that earned the rare privilege of earning a bounty on his head from the MTA!

A Senior Mech Designer ordinarily wouldn't be kicked from their membership rolls even if they had some blood on their hands. They were mostly content to leave law enforcement in the hands of the states.

Only a couple of exceptions roused them into action. One of them would be to break one of the taboos. Another one would be to violate the tenets of mech design.

Skull Architect Jimenez was guilty of the latter.

Whatever depraved theory he came up with in his fruitless search for the X-Factor compelled him to make use of human remains.

It would have been one thing if he killed random thugs or slaves from the frontier. The Skull Architect detested lowlives. The personality of a mech was defined by its soul. Embedding the soul of a thug in his mechs would merely drag them down.

Jimenez only wanted the best for his mechs. In that sense, his pursuit for perfection was disturbingly similar to Ves' insistence for quality.

To the Skull Architect, only the bones of mech pilots qualified as valid raw materials. The better the mech pilot, the better his mechs performed, at least according to his fantasy. His bone-infused products never performed any different to his regular mechs.

He initially began his experiments with utilizing the bones of dead mech pilots that scavengers picked up from long-abandoned battlefields. These bones usually had little value, so it didn't take much effort for someone like Jimenez to get their hands on them. Sadly, the Skull Architect concluded that rotten bones did not make for good materials.

Only the freshest bones satisfied his cravings!

Mech pilots in the Vermeer Group in the Friday Coalition started to disappear. No one knew where they had wandered off to. However, the kidnappers had been capable enough to clean up their tracks, so the truth behind their disappearances had long been an unsolved mystery.

All of this changed once he crossed the line. Unsatisfied with the results of his experiments up to date, he came to the conclusion that his raw ingredients weren't good enough.

The souls of basic mech pilots and advanced mech pilots weren't strong enough to provide any measurable boosts to his mechs. Only expert pilots would do.

One day, a famous expert pilot ended up missing.

The entire Vermeer Group panicked and sprung into action. The disappearance of thousands mech pilots didn't matter to a behemoth that was one of the principal partners of the Friday Coalition. Yet the disappearance of a single expert pilot was completely different!

With the full investigative might of the Vermeer Group brought to bear, it only took half a day to track down the kidnappers, work their way up to the ones

who issued the contract, and from there beat out the name of their client from their mouths.

To their horror, the one who was responsible for kidnapping and ultimately killing their prized demigod was none other than a respected Senior Mech Designer.

It was a wonder he managed to flee the Coalition and stay out of reach from the vengeful hunters of the Mech Trade Association. His depraved experiments defiled the honor of expert pilots and cast a stain upon the profession of mech designers!

The scandal remained a hot topic for weeks in the entire star sector!

To her credit, Mayra didn't seem offended at the reactions of Ves and the chiefs. If anything, she took it as a badge of honor. "My mentor is extremely dangerous. He has to be in order to survive in the frontier."

"What kind of status does he enjoy in the frontier?" Ves asked.

The Skull Architect had dropped out of the news ever since he fled from civilized space. Heck, many people thought he was dead!

"My mentor is one of the main shareholders of Malligan's Pitstop, a medium-sized independent pirate station. His mech industry is based there. Mechs sold from the station carries his personal guarantee. His word is as good as certification from the MTA."

"Ah." Ves understood. "There's no oversight from the MTA beyond civilized space."

In civilized space, mech designers and purchasers of mechs relied on the MTA's long-standing system of validating mech designs and certifying every mech that rolled off the production lines. Ves had taken this reliable system for

granted. He had never thought of a time where he wouldn't be able to rely on those services.

The scams taking place in the underground markets of Harkensen III had already given him a taste of how difficult it was to do business without a neutral arbiter. The only way a layman could purchase a reliable product that performed as advertised was to hire a mech appraiser.

The problem that came with this choice was that there was little anyone could do if a mech appraiser was biased. During his previous strolls in the grey and black markets, Ves witnessed the appraisers discretely favoring one stall owner's products of another. Who could say if the mech appraiser hadn't already been bought by the stall owners?

"I gather you play a very important role with the Swordmaidens. It's different here. Many smaller mercenary corps and other outfits can do just fine without a mech designer on retainer. They can largely trust what they buy from the market."

Mayra snorted as she took a few sips of the soup that arrived next. "Trust is impossible to achieve from where we come from. The only loyalty comes from our family, and the Swordmaidens do a good job in binding us together. Unless you know and fought alongside someone for years, you can't trust anyone you meet. This is even more vital when it comes to mechs. It's our main weapon and the only way we can defend ourselves. A group without a mech designer will always remain a lackey to others."

They continued to talk about the differences mech designers faced in their different environments. In civilized space, mech designers flooded the industry. Millions of them graduated from the Komodo Star Sector alone. The market couldn't possibly accommodate all of them, therefore leading to a situation where competition had reached an increasingly brutal degree.

"There aren't that much mech designers in the frontier." Mayra explained the floating bots picked up her half-empty plate and replaced it with some kind of gelatinous substance. "The education system in the frontier isn't very developed. Most people learn from automatic teaching programs or through browsing free lessons on the galactic. Genuine teachers are worth their weight in exotics. It's exceptionally difficult to raise engineers and technicians when there's hardly any place to learn."

"Let alone a higher institution, many places don't even offer high school or elementary school-level classes." Ves added. "To raise a qualified ship engineer or mech technician, you need to educate the students from the very start."

The age of ten was widely used as the starting point of a child's future development. Before the state tested their aptitude, their future was in flux. Anyone could become a mech pilot, and lots of children held out hope even if their odds were small.

Once they reached this magical age, the truth would finally emerge. Many received a negative result, which meant their aspirations to become a mech pilot had been dashed. From then on, the children needed to find another calling, and take classes that would bring them closer to their future careers.

"Children are some of the most precious resources in our region. It is ten times harder for them to grow up there than in your safe and structured space. When we say that every Swordmaiden in our group is a daughter of the frontier, it carries a special meaning to us."

Mayra gazed at a younger Swordmaiden sitting next to her. Ves did not spot any family resemblance. While Mayra's genetic modification tinted her skin in a subtle shade of purple, the other girl's modifications had changed given her a pair of horns that looked strong enough to impale someone in the way.

She looked like a little demoness in a way. There was no telling what other modifications she hid underneath her clothes that consisted of a dragon scale-like pelt that glittered in orange and red.

Despite the lack of resemble, the Journeyman Mech Designer obviously cared a lot about the girl. She introduced the young girl to Ves. "This Ketis, my oldest student."

"I'm your first student!" Ketis growled. The girl looked ready to stare her teacher to death.

"Don't mind her. Ketis hasn't been exposed to the greater galaxy yet. She's barely earned her battle clothes."

"I slayed a Wistra Dragon with my own sword!"

Mayra laughed. "Hunting a single exobeast does not mean you are ready to spread your wings. Mech designers like us are valued in the frontier, but that also means that many pirates want to obtain us, and they don't care how. This cocky attitude of yours will land you in trouble eventually."

The pair of Swordmaidens bickered for a while. Ves had the feeling that Mayra regarded Ketis as her adopted daughter. However, while Mayra was tempered by age and experience, Ketis was flush with the excitement of her youth and aggressive upbringing. The Swordmaidens raised their maidens to be warriors, regardless of their ultimate vocation.

"You spend too much time on combat practice and not enough on your studies. You've already fallen behind on your mechanics classes! How are you supposed to design your own swordsman mech if you keep insisting on sparring against other Swordmaidens!"

"Don't tell me what to do! I'm a full-fledged Swordmaiden now! What I want to do with my time is none of your business!"



The family drama sounded surprisingly mundane if it didn't involve lethal weapons that could cut through the hangar bay deck. Ves found the idea of a sword-wielding mech designer absurd, but evidently Ketis tried her best to excel in both.

"Mech designers don't have to be combat marines or special forces operatives." He chipped in, wanting to provide his own perspective on the matter. "While it's true that relying on your own strength is foolproof, the problem is that you can only split your time to a certain extent. Many mech designers have never reached their full potential because they never made a plan or indulge themselves in too many distractions."

"How am I supposed to defend myself, huh?" Ketis retorted.

"By relying on others. That's the ultimate lot for mech designers. You never hear stories as mech designers that are excellent soldiers. It simply can't be done. It takes a lifetime to study the art of designing mechs. If you only spend half of your time on designing mechs and the other half on becoming a better warrior, you'll only end up average in both at best."

The young girl violently shook her head. "I don't believe that! It doesn't take too much time to keep up with my sword practice."

This must have been an old argument for the couple. Ketis' attitude would have never been tolerated in civilized space. Mech designers who lazed about or got distracted by other activities quickly became redundant in the industry. Employers could easily replace the slackers with more motivated mech designers.

As the dishes floated in and out of the dining room, the Vandals became a bit more accustomed to the hybrid-looking Swordmaidens. They were still human, in a way.

Mayra began to probe Ves on his background and accomplishments. She became mildly impressed when she found out that Ves had founded his own company and managed to become a nominal disciple to a Master Mech Designer.

"It's not so impressive." Ves said, not wishing to make a mountain out of a molehill. "I'm merely a part of the periphery in Master Olson's organization. I'm in no way comparable to her direct disciples."

The pirate mech designer eyed him with an appraising look. "You seem like you have a good head on your shoulders. Your grasp on mech design is more encompassing than the usual collection of fugitives that arrive in our region of space. I'd like you to tutor Ketis for a time."

"What?!" Ketis erupted. "That's absurd! I've got nothing to learn from this fellow!"

Even Ves was shocked. Though he understood Mayra's intentions, an unwilling student was the worst kind of student!

#### **Chapter 640 Bold Offer**

"The Skull Architect taught me more than theory or how to design a mech." Mayra spoke, brushing aside her bright purple hair. Whether her hair turned purple because she dyed it or because her genes had compelled it to, Ves couldn't guess. "He conveyed the attitude of a proper mech designer to me. Not a crafter of machines, neither a merchant of death, but a servant for mech pilots."

Ketis scoffed at that. "That's a stupid attitude to take. Without us, mech pilots would still be piloting primitive machines that's half as good as what they are using now."

"Do you see?" The older Swordmaiden shrugged her shoulders at her young charge. "Confidence is vital to our shared profession, but arrogance is a

deadly poison. When I grew up, the Swordmaidens was just an embryo of what we have accomplished today. I'm afraid that Ketis has taken too much of our comforts for granted. Back then, I had to compete against other mech designers, and work hard to earn the recognition of the Skull Architect."

Madman or not, a Senior Mech Designer usually possessed enough self-respect to adhere to the traditional customs surrounding mentorships. The pupil had to be worthy and compatible to the design philosophy he adhered to. Raising an unworthy mech designer beyond their level of competence reflected badly on the mentor.

"What about the Skull Architect? Won't he adopt your protege?"

"I've tried. He's a much more prestigious mech designer now. His standards aren't as low as they used to be. He only accepts the most promising pupils, or ones that will gain him favor among the pirate factions that rule over the Faris Star Region."

The Faris Star Region was the chunk of space adjacent to the Komodo Star Sector. For now, the classification purely existed on paper, but if the CFA ever decided to expand the borders of human space, the Faris Star Region would likely transform into the Faris Star Sector.

"I see. That's unfortunate for you. The opportunity to study under the wing of a formal Senior is very precious. Still, I'm not the equal of a Senior by any means. What is it you are asking me to teach, exactly?" Ves frowned.

He did not look forward to teaching what appeared to be the frontier equivalent of a spoiled brat. The attitude to mech design shown by Ketis meshed fairly poorly against Ves, who had always labored hard to the point that many people called him a workaholic.

"You see what I have to work with?" Mayra said as she threw an exasperated look at Ketis, who studiously ignored the two in favor of gobbling up a tart.

"The way we Swordmaidens raise our kin is geared towards turning them into warriors and survivors. This is fitting for mech pilots, but not for mech designers. By the time I realized this difference, it's already too late."

"Weakness is never a mistake!" Ketis exclaimed. "You know what the untamed stars are like. There's danger every step of the way. The moment we let our guard down is the moment we're at someone else's mercy."

Ves tried to be patient. "This sounds fine and all, but there's a thing called specialization. An outfit where mech pilots moonlight as mech technicians and mech designers try to become soldiers is a messed up group that won't survive in the long run. One good mech designer is as valuable as thousands of average mech designers, and I'm not joking about this! Quantity means nothing in our field. The quality of your Swordmaiden mechs is directly proportional to the skill level of your best mech designer. What will happen to your group when Mayra is taken away from you all? Who will be left to pick up the pieces?"

In his perspective, Lydia's Swordmaidens lucked out when they managed to nurture a Journeyman Mech Designer. Countless mercenary corps in the Komodo Star Sector would envy them if they heard some lowly pirate gang managed to gain a mech designer that could easily found their own companies and earn billions in revenue within the span of a single year.

In fact, it wouldn't be difficult for Mayra and Ketis to change their identities. They only needed to clean up their hybrid appearances, and pretend to come from a secluded planet in a forgotten corner of the star sector, and fake some credentials by bribing some struggling schools and institutions.

Ves knew this happened a lot, because he'd seen a couple of vendors advertising these kinds of services from Harkensen's black markets.

Of course, Lydia had done a good job in binding her Swordmaidens together. Their bond of sisterhood was of a slightly higher degree than the comradeship of the Vandals. Recruiting them when they were at a young and impressionable age and indoctrinating them to be completely loyal to the organization had turned them into completely loyal pawns.

When he looked at it, Commander Lydia had done everything possible to bind the Swordmaidens to her cause. The ties of sisterhood, the strange and unique customs, the proliferation of genetic modification, all of these measures isolated them further and further from the general norm and turned them into a separate and distinct tribe of humanity.

It was no wonder the Swordmaidens regarded other people as filth, while those very same people dismissed the Swordmaidens as barbaric amazons. Breeding the feelings of isolation and contempt for others was a surefire way of keeping your underlings under control.

This realization had upped his regard for Commander Lydia by another notch. Ves could learn a lot from her methods. He was already taking mental notes of her methodology. Once he returned to civilian life, he could apply the best practices on the Avatars of Myth and his yet-as-unnamed shadow force.

"So what do you think, Larkinson?" Mayra prodded him. "I think you have a good point regarding specialization. This is even more dire in the frontier where there is a large shortage in skilled technical personnel and reliable fabrication equipment. When something becomes scarce, it becomes valued. Ketis, the best form of protection is to remain valuable to your sisters. Knowing how to swing a sword may earn their respect, but you will lose your place among them. The Swordmaidens don't have the room to accommodate a useless sister."

This argument shut Ketis up. The girl might have been brash, but the crux of the matter was that she tried hard to fit in. Her participation in all of these

martial rituals allowed her to connect with her fellow sisters, but the more she spent time away from advancing her mech design ability, the worse off she would be at the end.

"Are you a Novice or an Apprentice?" Ves asked.

"She's a Novice." Mayra answered for Ketis when she looked peeved. "While she doesn't have the diplomas or MTA certificates to prove it, she's at a comparable level in every way you look at it. It is no problem for her to design a variant of the Misty Slasher or our other melee mechs. She can design variants of other melee mechs if she puts in more effort into her studies, but she's a long distance away from designing her first original mech."

Basically, the horned young woman with short green hair and an athletic stature was at the start of her formal mech design career. The status of a Novice wasn't very high, but at least it was better than someone who hadn't graduated at all. Ketis was a couple of years younger than him, so her current achievement was comparable to Ves at the start of his own career.

"Hmph." Ves considered the pros and cons. "I'm not sure my superiors will agree to this. I can't teach her very well over the galactic net. She has to intern on the Shield of Hispania."

Mayra waved her hand dismissively. "No problem. I'll tell Lydia to convince your boss to let Ketis be your guest designer. You don't need to hand over any classified materials to her. Just show her what you are allowed to show off. My main concern with Ketis' upbringing is that she hasn't been exposed to the essence of a mech designer's role. She's too familiar with the Swordmaidens and I, so she isn't able to divorce her feelings from business. I hope that you can bring her in a different environment and open her eyes in a way that can allow her to become independent when she comes back."

"That's a tall order, you know. Forget about mech designers from the frontier, even a huge chunk of classically-trained mech designers in civilized space aren't able to stand on their own two feet. For every success story, there are thousands of outright failures. I can't guarantee that Ketis can climb over this cliff."

He hadn't closed the door to this proposal entirely, which pleased Mayra a bit. She leaned back against her seat and crossed her arms. "I can make it worth your while."

"What can you offer? Mind you, I'm burdened by many responsibilities right now. I won't abuse my authority."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow. "I've kept an eye on your salvage parties. Many of them scoured over the debris field strewn with broken stealth shuttle pieces. Ordinarily, these pieces of debris shouldn't garner that much interest, as they're far too disintegrated to piece together a working machine."

His eyes grew sharp at the mention. He wanted to keep his interest in stealth technology quiet, but Mayra had been too perceptive for that. He might as well spill the beans, then.

"Investigating stealth technology is something of an interest of mine, primarily because I've been the victim of it several times. Who doesn't want to beat these cloaked bastards at their own game?"

The Journeyman smiled. "Stealth tech is unfathomable to most mech designers. Only the major factions have a grasp on this field, and they are very jealous about who gets to master it. Building an understanding of stealth tech from tiny pieces of shuttle debris is as futile as attempting to learn an alien language with only ten minutes of recordings. There are too many gaps that no amount of imagination can fill."

She wouldn't bring this topic up without a good reason.

"What is your offer, then? It's rather a stretch for me to believe you have access to stealth tech."

"You are correct." She laughed. "In the frontier, stealth tech is even more valuable, because it allows you to avoid pirates, sandmen and countless other threats. The few people who have access to this tech hoard it like a precious resource. It won't be easy to get in touch with someone who has an understanding of this tech, but I happen to know a very good mech designer who does."

Ves didn't have to think long and hard to come up with a name. "You're not talking about Skull Architect Jimenez, are you?"

"Correct! Before the Friday Coalition chased him away, he enjoyed a very high status in the Vermeer Group. He worked for many clients over the years, and as he advanced to Senior, the Vermeer Group drew him closer by inviting him to participate in several classified collaborative projects. In one such instance, he became involved with improving the design of a stealth mech. While he wasn't the specialist in charge of working with the stealth tech, he observed many details and is able to recall almost everything. Among the mech designers in the frontier, he is one of the great authorities on stealth tech for that reason."

She wasn't exaggerating. The Skull Architect worked on a second-class mech built to the standards of a second-rate state. The stealth capabilities of their stealth mechs far surpassed the capabilities of the stealth shuttles from the Masters of Combat.

Despite his recent resolutions, Ves couldn't help but salivate for that knowledge. His obsession with stealth technology sparked to life within his body, and were it not for the formal banquet occasion, he might have already bent down to his knees to beg the pirate mech designer for access!