

Chapter 671 Alternative Solution

Mancroft Independent Harbor had never been a popular tourist destination like Harkensen for a reason. The Bosey Clan had a much worse track record of safeguarding the lives of their visitors than the Reinaldians. The latter dealt extremely well with minor incidents, and only broke when an attack beyond their wildest expectations occurred on one of their strictest paradise planets.

With angry gamblers looking to force the Boseys to reverse their losses, the last thing Ves wanted to see was someone else trying to stir the pot.

Unfortunately, the Castle Breakers didn't get the memo!

"Uhm, Mr. Larkinson?" Ketis stammered all of a sudden from their internal comm channel.

"What is it now?"

"I just got a message from Mayra. She told me that the Omen of Misfortune is asking us for help. Commander Lydia is negotiating with their Misfortune Seer right now!"

"Damnit!" Ves erupted. "I hope to hell that Commander Lydia informs the Seer that they are already preoccupied with other matters!"

"That's not going to pass muster, teacher. We aren't known for abandoning our allies in the lurch. If the Omen of Misfortune are our pals, or if we owe them a favor or something, then we have to lend a hand! Otherwise, our other friends won't come and lend a hand when we call for help!"

Ves was glad that Ketis finally called him teacher, but their current circumstances left him with no time to celebrate. This station might descent into a bloodbath at any moment!

"Well, it's their fault they're being targeted by the Castle Breakers. Didn't you just say they're bigger and stronger than the Omen of Misfortune? Serves them right for provoking a bigger bastard than themselves."

Ketis stubbornly took the other side. "Even if they're too blame, the Castle Breakers are going too far! There's no way they can justify attacking the Omen of Misfortune after losing a public duel! The Hellvoice won the match fair and square?"

"Are you sure about that? Because half of the monkeys screaming out there are yelling that the match was rigged in her favor!"

"Doesn't matter. The Swordmaidens have always backup up our allies in a fight and they have always returned the favor. The only times when we didn't lend a hand was because our friends provoked someone they shouldn't have. That was their own fault and had nothing to do with us."

"And the Castle Breakers? You just told me they're fairly strong."

"Oh, they are, but they shouldn't be able to deploy more than two-hundred spaceborn mechs. If our Swordmaidens combine forces with the Omen of Misfortune, then we'll outnumber the Castle Breakers for sure! And that doesn't count in you guys as well."

"What makes you think the Vandals will participate in this foolish escapade."

"You guys have no choice." Ketis chuckled through the comm channel. "If you don't help us back up our friends, why should we trust you to cover our backs when we travel deeper into the frontier? I know pirates like us get a bad rap when it comes to trust, but it's important to us! Pirates who act like fair-weather friends don't survive very long in the frontier. Besides, what's the risk? As long as we combine our forces, we can beat the Castle Breakers black and blue!"

"If the Swordmaidens can call for backup, then the Castle Breakers call in their own friends as well!" Ves retorted.

"I doubt so. They're acting like sore losers now. There's no way anyone wants to risk their lives to take revenge of the Deathless. He was great when he was still alive, but all that's left of him is a broken body and his broken mech. He's completely useless now."

Backup or not, the Castle Breakers sounded formidable enough to be a handful by themselves. The last thing the Vandals wanted to do was to fight a completely unnecessary battle!

His mind inadvertently cast back to the moment where his group had just arrived at the crossroads one deck down. Back then, Ketis felt compelled to act because her dignity and the burden of reputation of the Swordmaidens expected her to do so.

The situation out in space played out in almost the exact same way!

"Both these stupid fights are about reputation and posturing!" He complained. "Why can't you pirates learn how to swallow your pride and let bygones be bygones?"

"Are you kidding?" She responded in a befuddled manner. "If you don't stand your ground and fight back, everyone is going to walk all over you. We've lost many sisters over the years, but they died gladly to keep the rest of us safe! The rep we built from then still protects us up to today!"

Ves accepted that argument, but he couldn't really fathom it even now. This way of dealing with others sounded intrinsically foreign to someone who grew up in the comforts of a civilized society.

He had no choice but to drop the matter, as it didn't concern him anyway. Let Major Verle and his officers decide whether they should join this circus. All Ves wanted to do was to bring back his purchases to the ship.

"Nolsen, how far away are we from the shuttle bay?"

"Three kilometers. With all the people and debris in the way, it might take an hour or two for us to get through!"

"That's way too long! We need to find a way to hurry up!"

Despite the unruliness of the pirates and other people who lost all their money, Ves harbored no doubt the Boseys had the situation in hand. While they weren't the first owners of the Independent Harbor, they did manage to hold on to it for a few decades, so they should have prepared an appropriate response.

The only problem was that the chances were high that the response involved a gratuitous amount of violence! After all, the simplest solution to a problem in the frontier was to shoot it into pieces!

The shenanigans about to unfold within and outside the space station left Ves with little patience.

"Hey brothers! Wait a moment! We need your help!"

A random gaggle of wasted thugs stumbled into view. They looked as pathetic and ill-composed as the last batch of pirates who Ketis sliced into bloody pieces. Ves already groaned. He was too tired to deal with this nonsense.

Nolsen stepped out with his intimidating exoskeleton armor and brought his huge rifle to bear on the stupid pirates.

"MOVE. OR. DIE." He broadcasted through the amplified speakers in his helmet.

An awkward pause ensued. The drugged-up minds of these lowlives couldn't process the script going awry from the start. Most of them cowered, but there were a couple of pirates who looked so intoxicated that they couldn't even

recognize the massive threat posed by four exoskeleton soldiers with enough firepower to lay waste to this entire section!

"YOU DON'T WANT TO MESS WITH US. LEAVE!"

When the thugs dithered because their thoughts moved at the speed of a snail, Ketis growled and started to step forward while brandishing her sword.

This time, Ves latched his gauntlets on to her waist armor, halting her from escalating the standoff.

"What do you think you are doing, teacher?" She hissed through the channel.

"If another fight breaks out here, it can easily escalate to a point where the Boseys are forced to step in. I doubt they'll hold back their trigger fingers when they see us in sight. Don't intervene. Nolsen and his men are professionals."

After a few seconds of trying and failing to persuade the dimwitted thugs to stop blocking the street, the Vandal security officers resorted to action instead. A hidden module in their exoskeleton armor suddenly came to life.

"ENGAGING SONIC ATTACK."

Four ear-squealing screams erupted from the speaker grills of the exoskeleton suits. They thundered in a cone in front of them and blasted the unsuspecting pirates with enough noise to deafen a man twice over! All of their eardrums instantly erupted, and they all collapsed to the deck, in pain and insensate to the outside world!

"PROBLEM SOLVED."

The Hellvoice wasn't the only one who possessed sonic weapons!

In actual fact, sonic weapons had been primarily developed as a way to subdue rioting crowds of humans. The Bright Republic's Planetary Guard

heavily favored sonic weapons as an alternative when their fluid projectors ran empty.

The limitations of this weapons were many, though. A modern suit of enclosed armor insulated wearers from painful and deafening noise, and obviously it only worked in atmospheric conditions. In space, sonic weapons turned into nothing but ornaments, because there wasn't any air for sound to travel through!

Fortunately, Ves and the others didn't face such an extreme situation right now. He gestured for the group to resume moving.

Ketis grumbled under her breath for leaving the scum alive, but she hardly cared about them in the first place.

Similar incidents happened three times more along the way. Every hundred meters or so, a different gaggle of lowlives approached the deathly-looking Vandals and asked for their help in storming the Bosey-owned gambling establishment next to the mech arena.

Ves didn't even have to lift a finger for Nolsen and his security guards to move into action. Like a caped prince letting his royal guard clean up the riff raff, the exoskeleton-suited security officers utilized the diverse arsenal of their weapon platform to full effect. From sonic weapons to resorting to blasting the ringleaders with a wrist-mounted laser cannon, the operation of the exoskeleton suits reminded him of multipurpose mechs.

"The scale is different, but the shape is roughly similar. The only difference is that suits of exoskeleton armor are employed as main infantry combatants, while multipurpose mechs are considered jack-of-all-trades that are replete with compromises."

Multipurpose mechs didn't have a good reputation in the galactic rim, but it was a different story in the galactic heartland and the galactic center. Better

funding, better wealth and smaller parts with higher performance made it popular to blend many different weapon systems into a single mech.

There, every mech possessed some sort of flight capability. The galactic center even declared landbound mechs extinct!

Every mech designed in those prosperous regions of the galaxy came with at least three different weapons, and some might even carry dozens of small-scale weapon systems!

The mech landscape there was different, and required a different breed of mech designer to navigate the complexity of designing mechs with such a diverse arsenal of weapons.

That didn't mean that the purer, simpler way of designing mechs in the galactic rim was inferior. If there was one thing rim designers were good at, it was pursuing the highest efficiency and squeezing the maximum amount of performance out of a limited set of materials.

In this perspective, what the Skull Architect's design philosophy pursued was the embodiment of every rim designer's hope! He carried the torch of the most cherished dreams of every mech designer who needed to turn trash into treasure!

Ves found it ironic that exoskeleton armor had obviously succeeded in reaching the sweet spot in terms of performance and cost, while multipurpose mechs still had a long way to go in the galactic rim.

Of course, everyone could see that multipurpose mechs would eventually become more practical and ubiquitous as technology levels continued to advance. The days of designing a pure swordsman mech or a pure knight mech would soon become an exception rather than the rule.

These pure mech types still existed in regions where multipurpose mechs became the dominant form of mechs, but only weirdos and eccentrics still

stuck to them. Ves found that to be a shame, because mechs specializing in a single weapon system corresponded closer to human limitations.

The birth of multipurpose mechs represented a shift away from the concept of mechs as war machines in human form.

Ves shook his head, returning his mind back to the chaotic streets of Mancroft. The issue of multipurpose mechs would only come to a head at least a hundred years from today. Right now, he needed to worry about making it out of this space station with his life and his cargo intact!

Chapter 672 Bots Gone Wild!

On their way back to the shuttle bay, they encountered several dangerous situations. Most of the time, Ves and his group only reached the aftermath of a violent incident. People as well-armed as them gunned down the pirates that were stupid enough to get in their way.

Different gangs clashed against each other over when one gang revealed they supported the Hellvoice. Fights between these gangs lasted the longest and led to the most frigid butchering.

Overworked cleaning bots worked overtime to haul away the bodies and clean up the blood. It didn't help that their programming malfunctioned a few times due to the sheer amount of bodies in the way.

Sometimes, the larger cleaning bots mistook living people as corpses, brutally grabbing onto their bodies with razor-sharp pincers and lifting them off in the air as their very living bodies floundered in pain!

The smaller bots on the other hand swarmed by the dozens! They converged at the ankles of people who had waded through the pools of blood and aggressively wiped or sucked away the traces, not even caring if their cleaning routines penetrated straight through the clothes and broke through human skin!

Something very horrendous ensued at that point. The wounds inevitably started to bleed, which put the stupid bots into a supercharged cleaning mode. They intensified their cleaning routines and practically bore through the ankles until the hapless victims couldn't stand any longer!

Upon falling, the bots kept chewing away at their unprotected flesh, their simple artificial minds only fixated on cleaning blood, no matter if it came from a dead or living source!

"What the hell?!" Ketis stammered as her armored foot kicked a pair of small cleaning bots down the corridor. Her sights firmly fixated on the runaway bots and their misguided attempt to clean the space station by cleaning the blood-soaked humans that polluted the the place. "This.. someone should shut them off!"

"It won't work." Nolsen said. "I've already ran my military-grade automatic hacking module on them. Though they look rather cheap, their security suites are impenetrable to me. My guess is that the Boseys were tired of script kiddies hacking the bots to change their programming so they can pull off a prank. They invested heavily in upgrading their software security."

"This doesn't look like a normal malfunction." Ves observed with suspicion. "Any manufacturer of cleaning bots will program their products to ignore living humans. In fact, they should go out of their way to avoid them in the first place to prevent any harm!"

"Well, unless I'm mistaken, these bots have become man eaters now. Look at how they're dissolving that poor guy in highly-acidic cleaning solution!"

Unless a skilled professional hacker was around, these bots would continue to follow their faulty programming!

Ves truly had no clue what was going on. Did some malfunction cause the bots to get stuck in a faulty logic loop, or had some nefarious super hacker twist the programming of the bots as a deliberate attempt at sabotage?

Personally, he leaned towards a case of vandalism gone deadly. Perhaps some juvenile trickster had introduced a tiny error in their programming regarding their treatment of living humans and kept it buried there for some time.

Whatever the case, they needed to be destroyed before they could do more damage! The horrified screams of hapless station visitors already seared his mind with nightmares.

"Nolsen, take down the bots if you can! If we can't hack them, we can kill them instead!"

The security officers didn't argue and immediately opened fire. They mainly fired penetrative kinetic rounds in order to pierce through the tough exterior that protected the bots from kicking and other acts of vandalism.

Sometimes, the projectiles overpenetrated the bots and hit the humans cowering behind, but the Vandals took little mind of these slip ups. They already did their best trying to minimize the collateral damage.

Half a minute later, their weapons ceased firing. Around forty bots lay prone and steaming with several new holes decorating their shells.

They conveniently ignored the dying and the wounded. In any case, it was up to the Boseys to provide medical help.

"There are no more obstacles in the way. Let's continue moving."

They stepped past the dead, dying and wounded as if it didn't concern them at all. Ves had long lost his empathy for random strangers, let alone the folk who frequented the Independent Harbor.

Anyone willing to visit a hive of scum and villainy was either a scum or a villain!

A part of him felt bad for generalizing the entire population of the space station this way, but Ves really couldn't bring himself to care. His mind had already been doused in the blood of the frontier, changing his perspective closer to the standard of the frontier.

Amidst the untamed stars, there wasn't any distinguishment between the guilty and the innocent! The only difference that mattered was whether someone was strong or weak!

As they stepped past hordes of bots that ran out of control, the Vandals destroyed them all with extreme prejudice. Ves and Ketis didn't even have the opportunity to bring their own weapons to bear, as the exoskeleton soldiers proved to be brutally efficient at wiping out the erratic bots.

As they rounded the corner of another street, they inadvertently stumbled upon a pacification attempt by the Boseys!

Armed with exoskeleton armor that was just as deadly as those worn by the Vandal security officers, they fired off their electrorods with casual disregard, as if they didn't care if their electric weapons misfired and arced towards a bystander to the side!

Their rifles and wrist-mounted gun barrels blasted the rioting crowd of pirates with a variety of ballistic projectiles and laser beams. One powerful laser cannon raked half of the crowd with a saber-like beam!

The weapon immediately overheated, but the shock it gave to the survivors had been enough to break their drunken and drug-fueled courage!

"Run! The Boseys are gonna kill us all!"

"Ravienne will hear about this, Bosey dogs! She'll come down on your stupid space station like the wrath of a battleship!"

None of the wailings of the pirates mattered. By now, the only people on the street consisted of trouble makers aiming to force the Boseys into reversing their gambling losses. After losing their entire savings, they pretty much had nothing to lose!

The saner and more careful pirates as well as the treasure hunters and the other visitors all scurried off into one of the many shops and venues before they all barricaded up their entrances.

Naturally, Ves and his escorts formed the exception, because they really needed to return to their shuttle. Whatever the case, the odds were high that the Boseys might paint everyone on the streets with the same brush.

Ves cursed again. "Damnit, let's back off before they shoot us! We can't get into a fight against the entire Bosey Clan!"

They hustled out of the place before the trigger-happy Boseys could direct their weapons in the direction of the Vandals. Ves figured the heavily-armored Boseys already spotted them, but let them go because they were a tough bone to chew.

"Let's follow an alternate route!"

They took a small detour, only to run head-long into a bot apocalypse. They entered a former market plaza centering around a fountain and a sculpture of some self-important Bosey elder.

Such an idyllic location was usually the favorite of romantics and young adults. Now, the entire plaza along with the fountain had been drenched with endless amounts of blood and body parts. More than a hundred bots both large and small performed gruesome butchery on the helpless populace!

"Uh oh, the bots noticed us!"

A quarter of the bots immediately diverted from their dead or screaming prey and moved towards the blood-soaked newcomers. Somehow, the blood splattered on their armor was more enticing to these bots than the fresh blood pouring from the wounds of their helpless victims!

"Don't open fire yet, Nolsen! And you, Ketis, hold your horses and don't swing that sword!"

They could handle a hundred bots, but how many more did they have to destroy? Their ammunition stores only lasted up to a point, and killing these bots was futile as Ves estimated that Mancroft may be hosting up to a hundred-thousand of these machines!

Ves had been so engulfed by the massacres perpetrated by the bots that he almost forgot that they were dealing with bots!

What was a bot? It was an automated machine that ran on pre-programmed instructions. They were often built as cheaply as possible as they broke down fairly often for some inane reason or another. A place like the Mancroft Independent Harbor had no reason to commission high-quality, durable and expensive bots because their own visitors would steal them if that was the case!

Thus, the only threat they faced were cheap, mass-produced bots assembled out of the cheapest parts possible. The only part of value to these bots was their sturdy, vandalism-proof outer shell.

Ves retrieved one of his newly fabricated tools from his toolbelt. The jamming device he fashioned out of his own two hands was a far cry to the one demonstrated by Calabast back at Harkensen I, but it should still do the job at a given range.

"I've got a jamming device that should work effectively against these bots. Their programming might be airtight, but their crappy sensors shouldn't be that good considering they bump into people's feet all the time. Gather within four meters around me if possible."

This proved to be rather difficult as the huge exoskeleton suits really didn't leave much margin for error. Still, they squeezed tightly enough for all of them to be within effective range.

"Alright, I'm about to activate the jamming device! Make sure your suits are hardened against jamming interference and you don't have any fancy systems active! Make sure you switch your visor viewing mode from electronic to optical!"

It wouldn't do to blind his own guards, though Ves doubted the ECM-hardened exoskeleton armor could be affected by a handheld jammer. That was also one of the reasons why he urgently sought to upgrade its power supply with an ultracompact battery!

"Three, two, one, get ready!"

A nauseating field of what felt like supercharged static electricity came into being around the jamming device. The little thing hummed and vibrated even as it emitted an invisible field of electronic mud and fog.

"Will this even work, teacher?"

"Be patient! Don't attack yet!"

The bots that hovered within range neared the four-meter mark. Even before they crossed the line, several already veered off like drunken pirates! The closer they approached, the higher the odds of them going blind!

"It works! The jamming device messes with their sensors and other unhardened systems!"

Everyone breathed a little easier, though Ves noted that the pitiful standard battery of his device wouldn't last very long. He activated a function on his light combat armor, which caused its palm to heat up slightly.

If the tiny battery couldn't supply enough power, then Ves just had to supplement it with his suit power!

"Ignore the bots and pass through them. We don't have to address those dumb machines anymore!"

With the jamming device working its magic, their progress sped up at least threefold. The prevalent amount of bots scouring for blood managed to sniff out the solidifying blood that splattered their armor suits, but whenever they got near, they turned into complete idiots!

One of the downsides was that their cargo bot completely malfunctioned as well! The jamming field was simply too strong for the simple and basic floating bot. Ves heartlessly abandoned the useless bot and dug up his lockbox guarding his exotics from the pile of nutrient packs.

"Let's go!"

They ran through a field of blind and confused cleaning bots. The Vandal security officers managed to kick all of the bots out of the way before Ketis could use her legs to good effect!

"We've almost reached the right pier! The shuttle bay is just ahead!"

The health checkpoint that usually barred the way to visitors bearing infectious diseases had been completely blasted open. The group ran past the destroyed barriers and obstructions. If some kind of infectious disease was spreading around, well, at least their airtight suits of armor kept them safe!

They finally reached the end of the station proper. At this point, they passed beyond the main body of the space station and stepped into one of the

exterior modules extending at a perpendicular angle from the surface of the station.

Bosey custom officers already secured the area here. They gunned down rioting pirates and rioting bots alike. The defensive forces formed a defense cordon that enabled each visitor to run back to their shuttles without worrying about being shot at by random thugs or chomped at their legs by rampaging bots.

"We're here!"

Ves could finally turn off his jamming device before it drained his entire suit battery.

Chapter 673 Useless Boseys

The pier extended for several kilometers out of the space station proper. Ships and transports bringing in bulk cargo that couldn't conveniently be brought via shuttles often docked alongside one of the many piers of the Independent Harbor.

Some even docked at one of the specialized drydocks alongside the more exclusive piers. Whatever the case, hundreds of vetted and pre-inspected ships docked alongside the piers at all times.

Many of them began to evacuate from the troubled space station. Who were they kidding, their ship captains outright dropped all of their obligations and the crew or passengers they left behind on the station and tried to run without proper authorization!

"My Dirthe San Ortha! You thief! Where are you taking my freighter! That's my ship! I paid for it! This is mutiny, I say!"

"Our captain has left us behind! For all his talk about valuing our loyalty, he was the first one to get out!"

All the stranded folk wailed at their misfortune, but Ves and his escorts walked right past their useless forms. The shuttle bay was situated at the very end of the pier, extending directly into deep space.

As they walked the final stretch, Ves asked a pertinent question to Nolsen.

"What do you think just took place? At one moment, a grudge match between two famous mech champions was about to take place. The next, thousands of pirates started to riot about their gambling debts of all things, all the while the previous harmless cleaning bots turned into murderous blood-sucking fiends. At the same time, the Castle Breaker fleet is moving up against the Omen of Misfortune right at this moment, possibly drawing in the Swordmaidens to the conflict as well!"

"You're barking up the wrong tree if you think I have all the answers." Nolsen replied through their comm channel. "However, my gut feeling says that whoever threw the Harkensen System into chaos might have followed us here. They might have even assigned other saboteurs to lay the groundwork. I don't know what their overarching goals look like, but disrupting the entire Komodo Star Sector is definitely on their agenda!"

Calabast! It might have been her, or agents from the same unknown faction that was still shrouded in fog up until today!

The sabotage might have something to do with the game to track down the Starlight Megalodon. This entire hidden game had thrown several star systems into complete turmoil due to the intense greed on the part of the hidden players that controlled their chosen outfits like puppets on strings.

The timing served as powerful supporting proof in favor of this argument. Though Ves failed to identify a direct connection, the timing was far too coincidental for him to dismiss any relations to the game.

The alternative was to blame it all on his rotten luck, but his rational mind didn't believe in such superstitious concepts. The multiverse ran on a particular set of rules, and none of them stated that it should give Ves a bad day because he stepped out of his bunk with the wrong foot or something.

Perhaps the accusations of cheating or match-rigging possessed some merit. If the saboteurs wanted to provoke a lot of unrest, what better way could there be than to rig the overwhelming favorite candidate into a dubious loss?

Did the saboteurs have no shame? They even resorted to something as dirty as tampering with the sanctity of the Mech Games! Ves felt irrationally peeved at Calabast and her shadowy colleagues at desecrating this honored form of dueling with mechs.

And he didn't even know if she and her ilk had even stepped foot in Mancroft!

He shook his head inside his helmet. "I'm spinning theories on threads of conjecture again. There's not enough proof for what's going on! For all I know, all of this madness is the result of a domino effect of bad coincidences!"

Up until now, they only faced scum and bots that his security guards easily dispatched. If the saboteurs seriously wanted to hamper their fellow competitors to the Starlight Megalodon, then they needed to bring the big guns.

Another alarm rang throughout the entire space station. This one sounded much deeper and much more serious.

"HIGHEST PRIORITY ALERT! A BATTLE BETWEEN TWO MAJOR MECH FORCES IS TAKING PLACE WITHIN 100,000 KILOMETERS FROM THE MANCROFT INDEPENDENT HARBOR! THE RISK OF MECH WEAPON DISCHARGE REACHING THE MANCROFT INDEPENDENT HARBOR IS MINOR BUT NOT NEGLIGIBLE! IT IS ADVISED THAT EVERY RESIDENT

AND VISITOR MAKE THE APPROPRIATE PREPARATIONS AGAINST LOSS OF POWER, ATMOSPHERE, TEMPERATURE AND GRAVITY."

The warning repeated twice after another, as if the loud droning voice and the alert messages spamming their comms wasn't enough.

Pff! Those dumb pirates probably still wouldn't get the message after all of that prodding.

Fortunately, the visitors at the pier were a little more sober than others. Many had already unfolded their vacsuits into covering their entire body, with a flimsy flexible helmet covering their heads.

The thin vacsuits wouldn't be able to protect them against flying debris, but it at least kept them alive if they got flung out of space.

Mere seconds after the warning message stopped blaring against their ears, a volley of explosive rounds impacted the surface of the space station!

The entire superstructure shook minutely, causing Ves and the others to pause in their steps. They looked at their helmets for a single moment before they simultaneously erupted into a run!

With the space station itself at risk, they had to reach their shuttle as fast as possible!

"C'mon, faster, you Vandal slowpokes!"

Ketis surprisingly turned out to be their fastest runner. She had even sheathed her greatsword behind her back to aid in her running.

Coming up close behind her was Ves. His light combat armor impacted him minimally and these suits had all been designed with speed and agility in mind. The cape flapping behind him billowed in the air and formed a minor annoyance, but Ves was too preoccupied with running to cut the distracting thing off his back.

The slowpokes Ketis mentioned turned out to be the exoskeleton-suited security officers. Some of the slimmer, speed-focused exoskeleton suits could run even faster than Ketis. However, Nolsen and his subordinates had come with heavy-duty exoskeleton armor this time. The toughness of their armor made them impervious to small arms fire, and their heavy caliber weapons and weapon mounts made sure that any opposition turned into shredded meat.

Their suits of exoskeleton armor had been built like sluggers, able to absorb a lot of hurt and reciprocate with overwhelming firepower. Speed had been relegated as a distant priority!

Their thunderous footsteps echoed against the decks, but no matter how fast they tried to move, their lumbering forms couldn't surpass the running speed of a senile old man!

The Boseys actually did a great job at intercepting incoming weapons fire. They possessed plenty experience in suppressing trouble makers and the readiness of their spaceborn patrols made their Reinaldan counterparts resemble a bunch of lazy bums.

Wherever the incoming weapon fire came from, the mech pilots who discharged them didn't seem to pay too much attention to where they ended up if they overshot their targets. This reckless degree of weapon handling and muzzle discipline could only be shown by pirates!

"Isn't it too much to ask for them to train their mech pilots properly?"

The pier was largely enclosed and the main battle between the Castle Breakers and the Omen of Misfortune took place way beyond a range visible to the naked eye. Nevertheless, the nature of spaceborn combat effectively compressed all distances when it came to vulnerability.

The Mancroft Independent Harbor might as well be situated a few blocks away from the developing mech battle in high orbit! With hundreds of mechs sparring and exchanging weapons fire against each other, the odds of weapons fire affecting the station was small but very much possible!

One second, everything was okay, the next, a huge volley of laser cannon beams sliced through the base of the pier connecting it to the main station!

"DROP DOWN TO THE DECK AND ACTIVATE YOUR MAG MODULES!" Nolsen instantly shouted.

All of the security officers had been extensively trained in various emergency situations, so they already moved even before Nolsen issued his warning.

To her credit, Ketis moved nearly just as fast. As a daughter of the frontier, she often had to deal with the reality of travelling aboard old, unspaceworthy ships that could keel over at any time. Preparing for these kinds of emergencies was as natural as paying taxes in civilized space.

Ves reacted the slowest. His training in responding to crises only reached a rudimentary level, something which was a severe oversight that he intended to remedy once he was safe. Right now, he awkwardly tumbled to the deck, more propelled by the mag modules of his combat armor than anything else.

The mag modules attached to his boots, knees, palms, elbows and waist secured his entire body to the deck with magnetic force.

He moved just in time, because the giant holes burned through the pier sucked out the air inside the pier like gigantic cleaning bots on stimulants! Many vacsuited visitors helplessly got sucked out along with the escaping air, their cheap suits unable to fix them into place on the deck!

The smarter fellows always stayed close to benches, poles and other solid objects affixed to the deck. They hugged their bodies against the fixtures,

holding onto it for their dear lives as there was no guarantee that anyone was going to pick them up once they launched into space!

The situation was slightly more complicated for Ves because he also needed to secure his lockbox and its valuable contents. The lockbox inconvenienced him a lot because it was a large, solid cube the size of a human head.

The only upside to its huge size was that it protected its contents very well. Not only would it be difficult for small arms fire to penetrate the lockbox, it also contained various sophisticated shock-absorbing systems that negated all the effects of rough handling.

Their suits rang an internal alert. Mancroft had broadcasted another emergency message to their comms!

[PIER 34 IS PARTIALLY DISCONNECTED FROM THE MAIN STATION. DUE TO THE WEAKENING OF KEY STRUCTURAL SUPPORTS, PIER 34 MUST PERFORM SEPARATION WITH IMMEDIATE EFFECT. PLEASE REMAIN AT YOUR CURRENT LOCATION AS SEPARATION STARTS. THE BOSEY CLAN DOES NOT AND HAS NEVER GUARANTEED THE SAFETY, SECURITY AND HEALTH OF ITS RESIDENTS AND GUESTS ON THE MANCROFT INDEPENDENT HARBOR. THE BOSEY CLAN APOLOGIZES FOR THIS INCONVENIENCE AND HOPES YOU ENJOYED YOUR STAY AT THE MANCROFT INDEPENDENT HARBOR. PLEASE COME AGAIN.]

The almost worthless corporate message conveyed a key message. The pier they currently resided on was about to be blown away from the main station!

"Brace for, uh, whatever the Boseys are up to! Don't separate!"

The entire flimsy pier structure lurched as a series of drastic procedures took place.

First, the docking clamps holding the parked ships next to the pier retracted all of a sudden. To the docking clamps that couldn't do so because of a loss of

power or a faulty connection, they simultaneously blew up or disintegrated into tiny fragments.

Whatever the case, this had the effect of pushing away the parked ships that still hadn't been able or willing to get clear.

The sudden release of the docking clamps forced the dithering ships to make a forceful separation from the unstable pier. They boosted away from the dangerous structure, giving it enough room to commence with the next phase.

Tiny explosions ran through a pier section that was just beyond the checkpoint that the Bosey guards had hastily thrown up. All of them huddled far apart from each other with the mag boots fully online.

After a few seconds of constant explosions, the entire pier lurched as it finally blew away from the main body of the Independent Harbor! The pier had been flung away into space by the final explosion!

The pier lost power and air, plunging it into near-total darkness. The only light came from the giant holes burned by the laser cannons.

Still, that didn't hamper the armor-suited men and woman much. They merely switched to a different observation mode on their visors.

"The pier has lost power." Ves stated the obvious. "But that shouldn't stop us from reaching our shuttle. According to the latest status report the crew sent us, our shuttle is still waiting for our arrival! Come on! It's just a small distance up ahead!"

Chapter 674 Unmoored

Ves figured out a fundamental rule in the galaxy. The further away from the galactic center, the lower the average intelligence quotient of the people he met.

Certainly, exceptions to the rule existed. Great leaders and driven individuals such as his uncle Ark, his grandfather Benjamin, Colonel Lowenfield and

every Senior and Master Mech Designer he met soared from the muck and mud.

But these exceptions only emerged from one out of a million or one out of a billion people. Such low odds condemned the vast majority of the galaxy to the vagaries of the stupid.

No matter which mech pilots fired those laser cannon beam that almost separated Pier 34 from the main superstructure of the Independent Harbor, Ves had no doubt that the threat could have come from any of their comrades fighting in space.

What was their fight all about, anyway? It practically made no sense to Ves! The Castle Breakers would be idiotic to force a fight with the Omen of Misfortune in the vicinity of Mancroft Station! Just those errant laser cannon beams alone made them persona non grata to the Bosey Clan!

The gains, whatever they were after, could never match the enormous losses they were about to suffer!

"That's not true, is it?" He rhetorically asked himself as his light combat armor clung for dear life on the free floating pier that had just detonated itself away from the main superstructure. The pier even threw into a light spin that it couldn't compensate for because it hadn't incorporated any boosters! "I can think of one object to gain that is worth fighting for! It may even be an enormous enticement for the Swordmaidens and the Vandals!"

What else could there be than an encrypted data chip from the Starlight Megalodon!

Even if the Flagrant Swordmaidens gathered a sufficient amount of data chips to figure out the route to the derelict capital ship, there was no harm in securing more, if only to deny their competitors the chance to follow the same route!

"Ugh, no wonder Mancroft went to hell in a handbasket. It's possible that there are six pawns in this star system!"

He mentally tallied them up. The Flagrant Vandals. Lydia's Swordmaidens. The Caged. The Red Tongs. The Castle Breakers. The Omen of Misfortune.

None of them sounded weak, though the Flagrant Vandals had the edge in numbers, quality and martial tradition. Yet even then, sheer numbers could easily overwhelm them. Attracting the ire of hundreds of the smaller pirate outfits that congregated at Mancroft at this time would certainly lead to an assured loss.

"The Vandals aren't the top dogs here. They've never been the top dogs whether they are in civilized space or in the frontier."

The older and more established mech regiments in civilized space could easily trounce the Vandals, while the big pirate blocs were enemies the Vandals could not afford to provoke. These complicated circumstances meant that the Vandals shouldn't easily get entangled into random fights.

However, if the Castle Breakers were after an encrypted data chip, then that almost guaranteed an intervention by the Vandals.

"If that's the case, this battle might have a ripple effect. If the Omen of Misfortune can drag in some friends, why not the Castle Breakers?"

The latter pirate gang might have been an independent outfit, but if there was one thing he had learned from Ketis, it was that no independent outfit survived without friends. With the stupid cultural expectation that you backed up your friends if they fell into a spot of trouble and called for help, this battle might very well drag in half-a-dozen outfits more!

This certainly explained why his comm blared out messages sent from the Vandals through their internal network.

Lydia's Swordmaidens answered the call to battle on behalf of the Omen of Misfortune!

The Flagrant Vandals followed their obligation to back up the Swordmaidens and indirectly lend a hand to the Omen of Misfortune!

The Caged and the Red Tongs both joined the side of the Castle Breakers!

A random collection of names representing small, single-ship or double-ship outfits joined the side of the Castle Breakers or the Omen of Misfortune.

The Boseys and everyone else tried to stay as far from this pissing match as possible! They already had their hands full in trying to subdue the unrest and regain all of their crew. They had no time nor desire to join a battle that didn't concern them at all!

The Vandals sent another message to his comm.

[TAKE CAUTION AROUND THE MEMBERS OF THE OUTFITS OPPOSING THE FLAGRANT VANDALS! IF POSSIBLE, TAKE THEM OUT BEFORE THEY TAKE YOU OUT! THE FLAGRANT VANDALS ARE CURRENTLY ENEMIES OF THE CASTLE BREAKERS, THE CAGED, THE RED TONGS,...]

Ves cursed, because weapons fire already flew over his head a few seconds earlier! A small group of pirates in red heavy combat armor had magged themselves to the deck further down the pier and spotted the conspicuous Vandals first. Like the idiots they were, they opened fire on Ves and his escorts without considering their relative strengths.

Big mistake!

"Open fire!"

"Wait! They're the Red Tongs!" Ketis shouted over the command channel. "If we fire at them, we'll be

"I don't think they care, Ketis! I'd rather survive this day than risk a puncture in my armor suit! Lieutenant, keep firing! Disable them if you can, but kill them if you have to!"

In a fight like this, holding back was a sin. One benefit of the heavy exoskeleton suits of the Vandal security officers was that its strong legs provided solid and stable magnetic footing. They could even walk upside down in a metal corridor under standard gravity if needed!

Thus, the security officers were virtually unhindered by the free floating pier and its slight uncontrolled spin. They fired their heavy guns at the armored Red Tongs, who numbered around twelve. The durability of their heavy combat armor matched Ketis' combat armor, but that didn't count for much as the heavy firepower overwhelmed them quickly enough.

The numbers advantage of the Red Tongs didn't account for much in the end! The quality difference between heavy combat armor and exoskeleton armor was too vast!

The only complications the Vandal security officers faced was that they needed to protect their VIPs. They positioned their sturdy bodies around the prone forms of Ves and Ketis and made sure to block any angle that could get at the two mech designers from the Vandals and the Swordmaidens.

Ketis and Ves added their own firepower as well, not that it made much of a difference. The medium caliber ballistic pistol Ves fired in the direction of the red-armored pirates hardly managed to land a hit. His marksmanship improved lately, but he hadn't spent enough time to become proficient with ballistic weapons!

Each time he fired his pistol, he managed to control the considerable kickback with his muscle strength with a dollop of help from his armor servos, but the round landed meters away from his intended target!

Laying just next to him, the brightly armored form of Ketis methodically focused her own ballistic handcannon on a single target at a time. Despite her enthusiasm for swordplay, she wasn't a slouch in marksmanship either. Combat practically ran through her veins despite her occupation as mech designer!

"How are you so good at landing those hits?" He asked with evident puzzlement in his tone.

"Hah! It's not me, but my auto aim system built into my handgun and my personal armor! I only have to program in the targets and pull the trigger and the auto aim system will do the rest!"

Okay, he revised his original assessment. Perhaps Ketis wasn't as good of a shot as he thought, but she certainly equipped the right gear for the right situation. Ves should have thought about incorporating an auto aim or aim assist system in his loadout as well!

Still, Ves grew up in a society where dependence on automatic systems was frowned upon. Though the same function existed on mechs, there were too many ways to fool or mitigate its effectiveness. The worst case scenario was that someone managed to hack the auto aim system and configured his enemies as friendlies while switching the statuses of his allies as his opponents!

No automated system was infallible! Plenty of horror stories and cautionary tales had taught humanity the folly of entrusting too much of their work on virtual dummies.

The recent cleaning bot apocalypse was a case in point!

The best solution would be to train his marksmanship the old fashioned way, but then again he risked falling into the same trap that Ketis had stepped into! Ves only had a set amount of time at his disposal. Hours being spent on

anything other than furthering or developing his mech design career only wasted his potential.

Fortunately, between the choice of relying on some AI system to do the fighting for him or spending thousands of hours practising his marksmanship in the firing range, a third solution presented itself. Rather than force a non-combatant like himself to defend his life, he could instead follow his original plan and leave that job to the professionals!

The twelve Red Tongs who thought their numbers availed them an overwhelming advantage had all been mowed down by the Vandal exoskeleton wearers. Their armor suits might have been awfully slow, but anything short of another exoskeleton armor or something even heavier had no chance of inflicting any serious damage to their tank-like exterior.

The Vandals achieved another complete win!

Fragments of red armor along with morbid body parts floated around in vacuum. The blood and flesh of the former Red Tongs flash froze in the awful condition of space, limiting the potential mess that could have ensued if the battle took place in a pressurized environment.

"Keep a lookout for more members of the Red Tongs and the other outfits that have arrayed against us. I don't want us to be taken off-guard like that again." Ves spoke in a commanding tone.

"Yes, sir!"

His group began to move forward again. Ves tentatively rose to his feet, but was unable to deal with the shifting inertia caused by the slight spin of the detached pier. He was forced to bend to his knees and crawl forward like a baby.

It was a wholly undignified sight, especially when contrasted against his majestic caped armor!

He felt a little jealous of Ketis, whose combat training and heavier armor afforded her a much steadier footing on the rolling deck.

For a moment, he considered asking for a helping hand from Nolsen, but the security lieutenant already bent down to grasp him inside his strong, armored grip. Though his new position looked a little undignified, it beat crawling on the deck like he was less than one year old!

"Thanks."

"You were slowing us down."

"Heh."

The Vandals and the Swordmaiden cautiously proceeded forward at a clip pace, which wasn't easy under these circumstances.

Fortunately, besides that first group of Red Tongs, no one else summed up the courage to attack their group. After five long minutes, they finally reached the shuttle they initially rode to the space station.

The pilot and its passengers hadn't left them behind!

The shuttle was active with its thrusters and modules ready to go. The passengers slid open the hatch by a tiny slither, from which the muzzle of a rifle extended out. The shuttle occupants had been on the lookout for trouble.

"We're here! Open up and let us in!"

The hatch slid open, revealing exoskeleton-suited security officers identical to the escorts accompanying Ves. Their hulking forms thudded aside to let the latecomers pour into the shuttle. Immediately, they found themselves on solid footing as the shuttle's artificial gravity asserted itself over the complete lack of the pier's own artificial gravity.

Ves could finally stand on his own power now!

"Thank the heavens for that! Are we ready to go?"

"You're the last delegation to arrive, Ves." Lieutenant Commander Soapstone said from the side. She was clad in a slightly scuffed version of his armor and had already strapped herself into her seat. "Strap in, boys and girls. We're about to blast off!"

They quickly secured themselves to the seats or the bulkheads and deck in case of the exoskeleton wearers. As soon as everyone confirmed they were secure, the shuttle blasted off at the highest maximum acceleration! Ves felt pressed into the seat as the shuttle raced out of the unstable and vulnerable pier with thousands of visitors and Bosey Clan guards still trapped inside!

What met them in space was a chaotic space battle spanning over thousands of kilometers in orbit of the lifeless rock that anchored the Mancroft Independent Harbor.

Getting back to the Shield of Hispania might prove challenging to a single, vulnerable shuttle!

Chapter 675 Riding the Storm

The shuttle pilot faced an uphill struggle trying to get back to their mothership. Ves, Ketis, Soapstone and their escorts wanted nothing more than to return to the safety of their well-armored combat carrier.

A shuttle in the middle of a space battle might as well be flying naked, because a single hit from a mech-sized rifle could instantly blast it and its occupants into pieces!

Shuttles were meant to ferry passengers and small cargo between different ships and between planets and ships. Their designers built them small, light and energy efficient in order to fulfil a vital logistical role in any fleet or settled planet.

They were expressly ruled out as active combatants in a spaceborn mech battle. They were barely better armored than aircars in their standard configuration. Heavier variants such as combat shuttles may have been used to drop squads of infantry into hostile territory, but the purpose of their slightly less flimsier armor was to protect them against small arms and man-portable missile launchers.

Against the might of mechs, they might as well be naked, because literally any mech could tear them to pieces!

The shuttle jinked from port to starboard, up and down, and spun on its own axis for some reason. The pilot in the cockpit didn't hold back anything in reserves and pushed her shuttle's mobility past the threshold where the antigrav modules and inertial compensators prevented its passengers from feeling any g-forces.

They were basically riding a barely controlled shuttle that was one step away from spinning out of control in an inevitable crash!

"I really hope the pilot knows what he or she is doing!"

"Trust in our comrades, Ves." Soapstone spoke from the side. "This isn't any different from entrusting our lives and our safety to the mech pilots who sortie out into the battlefield every time."

"Yeah, but at least in those cases, I'm safely tucked inside the protective embrace of a big fat combat carrier. Now, I'm riding a supercharged shuttle that is approaching the direction of the main battle in orbit!"

Hundreds of mechs slugged it out on each other, and Ves had no clue how the battle progressed. His limited feed to the Vandal internal network cut off as local jamming from both sides of the conflict threw the local information sphere into turbid noise. The shuttle's sensors captured some of the battle, but it didn't have the resolution or processing power behind it to fully resolve

the details of the fight taking place many thousands of kilometers away. The pilot already drew out the full resources of the shuttle to help in navigating the chaotic battlefield!

"Soapstone."

"Yes?"

"Since this battle erupted so suddenly, did you manage to secure the final batch of fuel and supplies for the fleet?"

"Oh, the last batch already shipped out an hour ago. Back then, it wasn't so clear if the Flagrant Vandals would be dragged into this fight. I'm sure the transports have dropped off their cargo at our logistics ships."

At least they didn't have to worry about missing out on their final resupply.

"Did you manage to secure anything else?" He asked.

"A few knick knacks here and there. You're not the only one who went on a detour for personal reasons. The only difference is that I was much closer to the pier when the fighting truly erupted! Wading through all of those malfunctioning cleaning bots was a slog!"

"That's the weirdest thing about this entire incident. I can imagine why the pirates who lost all of their life savings stirred up trouble. I can even imagine why the Castle Breakers would be impulsive enough to attack the Omen of Misfortune out of the blue. What I can't wrap my head around is why the bots were able to rebel in the first place."

He already formed his previous guess that whoever hacked the bots did so as a prank gone out of control or to destabilize the entire Mancroft Independent Harbor. He wanted to hear what Soapstone had to say and if she concurred with his theories.

"Hm.." She paused for a moment. "I don't have a solid explanation about the bots. My experience suggests that it's unlikely that a bug in the programming is to blame. Cleaning bots may look cheap to you, but they are sold and used in every single indoor location in human space. Do you know how many cleaning bots are used in the Bright Republic alone? Some estimates put their total number at five times the Republic's total population, and that is just a conservative estimate!"

"So because a cleaning bot is so prevalent, a lot more care is put into their design than other products?"

"Exactly! They are some of the most bug-tested, optimized and abused bots the galaxy. They are frequently employed in sensitive rooms where matters of great import to a state, planet or company is discussed. Will their buyers allow these bots to clean these sensitive rooms if they are embedded with hidden sensors and recording devices? Absolutely not! Therefore, the integrity and soundness of the hardware and software of cleaning bots endures some of the most rigorous tests in the galaxy."

It made sense. Soapstone rambled a bit about all the certifications a cleaning bot had to go through before being pronounced ready for use. A silly bug like mistaking open wounds on living bodies as a stain to be wiped away really shouldn't have occurred in even the worst cleaning bots on sale today.

Ves nodded in agreement. "So that directs us strongly to the possibility of deliberate sabotage. Still, if cleaning bots are so rigorously tested and developed, how come a hacker managed to penetrate through their ironclad programming?"

Now that he thought about it, it took more than a single whiz kid who knew his way around the virtual battlefield. Cleaning bots were everywhere, out in the open and vulnerable to all kinds of intrusions. Nolsen tried to engage his

military-grade automatic hacking module on the stupid bots, but it plainly couldn't find a way to drill through their firewall.

What the cleaning bots lack in hardware prowess, they more than made up for it with exquisite and virtually impenetrable software!

Soapstone announced her conclusion. "It's a premeditated hack, and far too complex to be done by a single hacker with a vendetta against cleaning bots. This smells like the kind of stunt a state-backed intelligence agency would pull off. Only they are sophisticated enough to research and dig out an unpatched bug hidden deep within the programming of the bots."

That partially matched his own guesses. "I concur. Whoever is behind it has plenty of hacking muscle at their disposal."

This also highlighted the risks of becoming too dependent on machines. Fortunately, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens ran their most important systems through manual controls, only relying on machinery to perform bulk calculations or precise movements that couldn't be done by human hands or minds. They were considerably hardened against a virtual attack.

In the worst case scenario, their combat carriers even came with the option of pulling the metaphorical plug! This shut off virtually every digital system on the ship and delegated controls to actual human beings who needed to perform every action by hand.

It was terribly inefficient, but it was better than nothing when faced with an overwhelming hacker on the enemy's side.

As for mechs, they possessed natural protection from most forms of hacking due to their peculiar control method.

The neural interface practically blended the mech pilot's mind with the cold hard circuits and processors of the mech. In that active state, the line between

the human mind and the machine mind became a little blurred. It was difficult to say where one reached the end and where the other began.

From what Ves had learned from Iris' tutoring sessions, an active mech was controlled by a hybrid amalgamation that was neither exclusively man or machine, but both at the same time. This led to a lot of strange repercussions that was wildly out of the scope of her tutoring session, but one of the strongest reminders she imparted him was that this amalgamation couldn't be hacked.

"It takes man-machine hybrid to hack a man-machine driven mech." She solemnly spoke back then. "Do you know how weird that sounds? It requires a potentate with the potential to pilot mechs, but instead of pursuing their natural vocation, they instead dedicate their life to becoming a mech hacker."

Mech hacker! This forbidden profession formed the bogeymen of every living mech pilot! If there was anything they feared above all else, mech hackers must be close to the top of their list!

Still, Ves didn't fear their presence here in Mancroft. The MTA loathed mech hackers with the same vehemence against weapons of mass destruction and actively hunted them down whenever they showed up in civilized space.

If any hackers were still present at Mancroft, then they could only work their magic on regular machinery.

Machinery like.. their shuttle!

"Damnit, do you think our shuttle is secure?"

"Hey, calm down Ves." Soapstone gestured him to remain strapped to his seat. "Have some faith in our own gear. We're very thorough in updating the firmware of all of our vehicles and equipment, shuttles included. We also employ our own hackers who are constantly on the lookout for enemy hackers."

He needed that reminder. As a military mech regiment, the Vandals wouldn't be caught off guard by a virtual attack.

As Ves contemplated many possibilities, the shuttle kept juking along the periphery of the battlefield. It was slowly but firmly navigating towards the formation of Vandal and Swordmaiden ships.

As the shuttle flew closer to its mothership, the vehicle had a few close shaves. The most threatening part of their journey came when missiles fooled by ECM systems lost their targets and flew off into random directions. One of them almost engaged a lock on the shuttle, and if not for being shot out of the sky by a distant Akkara on anti-missile duty, the shuttle and its occupants would have been blasted into pieces by a missile designed to wreck starships!

None of the occupants were religious in any way, but they silently prayed to whatever superstition gave them warmth in these trying times.

A sudden thud clanked from the deck. The rough impact almost threw Ves off his seat, and only the straps kept him firmly in place.

"We've arrived at the Shield of Hispania! We're home!"

Everyone sighed in relief or let out a deep breath. Nobody was in a mood to cheer or celebrate considering that they had just run the gauntlet.

"Let's move, let's move, let's move! Everyone out! We need to secure the hangar bay!"

The straps holding him in place automatically disappeared, enabling Ves to get back on his feet. The passengers poured outside the shuttle, upon which Lieutenant Nolsen threw Ves a quick salute.

"My escort mission is over. My menn and I are needed elsewhere, so see you later, Ves!"

"It's been a pleasure, Nolsen!"

They all moved away from the landing deck and exited the shuttle bay in order to avoid getting in the way of busy servicemen. Ves was very much aware that they practically hot-dropped onto a combat carrier in the midst of a running engagement! He eagerly wanted to apprise himself of the situation and see if he could be of assistance.

Ves turned to Ketis. "If I recall, you aren't cleared to enter the command center yet. Since you don't have any formal combat posting, it's best for you to stay out of the way. Go back to our office and stay put."

"But whyyyy? That's boring, teacher! I want to go fight, or at least watch the battle!"

"I can give you the recordings later but right now the Vandals don't have time to entertain your wishes. Go to the office, go to the bunk, or head down to the mess hall and grab some chow if you need to fill up your stomach!"

The Swordmaiden grumbled a bit but she knew she couldn't go against the Vandals on her own. As she grudgingly trudged away, Ves briskly marched towards the upper decks.

Chapter 676 Castle Breakers

By the time Ves had reached the command center, the battle had reached a climax. Ves made a profound impression on the crew as his elaborate set of armor replete with a thick cape and bloodstains on his greaves made it seem like he had waded through scores of bodies to get here.

"Mr. Larkinson, for the Republic's sake, I can forgive you for entering with your showpiece armor, but clean up your bloodstains before you enter!"

"Ah, my apologies, major! I'll get right on it!"

Ves took a small detour to wipe the stains off his armor. Once he no longer had any spec of blood marring his armored pirate guise, he returned to the

command center and sat in the observation seat, which had to readjust its dimensions to accommodate his light combat armor.

He was about to ask what he could do to help, but Major Verle and the rest already seemed engrossed in their own duties. They looked like they had the battle well in hand, so Ves would only disrupt their harmony if he butted in.

He took stock of the situation in space. The Omen of Misfortune faced the brunt of the enemy offensive. However, Lydia's Swordmaidens and the Flagrant Vandals moved to assist by hitting the flanks of the Castle Breaker fleet. This forced them to abort their bullying attempt on the weaker Omen of Misfortune and redirect their spaceborn mechs to defend their vulnerable starships!

Meanwhile, the Caged and the Red Tongs threw themselves in the battle as well, but not so enthusiastically as the Flagrant Swordmaidens. The close-ranged mechs of the Red Tongs guarded over the long-ranged rifleman mechs of the Caged. They focused their efforts on harassing the forces of the Omen of Misfortune, occupying the hapless pirate gang steeped in mystique and preventing them from taking revenge on the beleaguered Castle Breakers.

Smaller pirate outfits flitted at the periphery, their insignificant mechs and firepower barely affecting the greater trend of the battle.

"Seems like the Castle Breakers bit off more than they could chew." He muttered as his eyes gazed over the plot like a roving hawk taking its time to select a suitable prey. "The Vandals already outnumber the Castle Breakers in terms of spaceborn combatants, and it's an even worse for them now that we have the Swordmaidens backing up our forces."

Lydia's Swordmaidens didn't exactly excel in spaceborn combat, but their murderous swordsman mechs made any clash in melee range a destructive endeavor.

As their name suggested, the Castle Breaker's mech doctrine excelled in breaking fortified position. They employed a mix of artillery mechs, cavalry mechs and a substantial lineup of medium melee mechs to crash and exploit any opening they made in an enemy's fortified position.

This was a strong but expensive mech lineup. Normal pirate outfits shied away from such a mech doctrine because it required adequate funding and a talented roster of mech technicians and mech pilots. Only elites among the pirates applied to join the Castle Breakers!

"Still, once they manage to get this lineup together, it can certainly pay back for itself in record time."

A stronger mech roster opened up new ways to earn money. From what Ves briefly found out through a quick search on the galactic net, the Castle Breakers opted to follow the essence of their name. They earned their living by cracking open secure settlements and fortified space stations like they were pinatas and grab all of the goodies that became exposed!

No fortress or stronghold in the frontier was safe against them. Heck, they even drifted into civilized space from time to time to attack distant company outposts. The only reason why they hadn't been banned from civilized space was because they scrupulously avoided civilian settlements in the Komodo Star Sector.

The same couldn't be said for the settlements in the Faris Star Region. The Castle Breakers weren't above raiding, pillaging and enslaving the degenerated descendants of past starfarers that had become stranded in the frontier.

They found a lucrative way to sustain themselves, and with a mech champion like Rowland 'Deathless' Ryke as their standard bearer, they attracted numerous skilled independent mech pilots over the years.

However, the talent of their mech pilots and the above average quality of their mechs was only relative to the predominant standard in the frontier. Their expensive mechs were as brittle sand when faced with the refined and well-designed mechs of the Flagrant Vandals. Their so-called elite pirate mech pilots faltered when they met the disciplined, coordinated Vandals who employed various battle formations to befuddle their individualistic minds!

The chaotic situation aside, the Castle Breakers had no hopes of winning against the Flagrant Vandals. Both sides knew it, so the Castle Breakers had started showing signs of trying to disentangle themselves from the battle they provoked on their own accord.

"It's not so easy to escape responsibility for your own actions!" Major Verle grinned as he leaned closer at the projection of the battle plot. "Captain Rakeshir, drive the fleet forward! Their mobility is their weak point! Let's show them how we Vandals break such a lumbering mech force into pieces!"

"Aye, major!"

The battle had already entered a superheated phase with the Vandals gaining the upper hand from the moment they entered the battle. At no point were the Castle Breakers able to overcome the Vandal superiority in numbers, training, skill or martial tradition. They had already reinvigorated their attempts to back off from the fight, but the Vandals smelled blood right now and wouldn't let them leave!

The combat carriers of the Vandals surged ahead. The Shield of Hispania shook as her sub-light propulsion pushed the flagship into a straight course into the middle of the dogfights between their mechs.

"The mechs of the Castle Breakers have entered into the effective range of our Akkara mechs! Do you wish to give the command to open fire, sir?"

"Not yet!" Major Verle commanded. "Wait until our targets enter into medium range. At this range, our heavy artillery mechs will be liable to hit own our machines."

Everyone impatiently waited for their combat carriers to reach this magic range. The Akkara mechs had already slotted themselves into the bunker hardpoints placed along the hulls of the combat carriers. They were meant to blast their opposition apart, and it didn't matter whether they fought in space or on land!

The Castle Breakers weren't stupid. They saw the heavily-armored carriers of the Vandals coming, and their sensors spotted the heavy mech bunkers as well as anybody else.

Though the Castle Breakers possessed their own artillery mechs, they were one weight-class lighter and couldn't never match blow-for-blow against a heavy mech designed exclusively for the military!

Their retreat grew more frantic. The Vandals tried their best to pester their opponents and lock them into place, but it became harder to hold them as space offered too much freedom of movement to be pinned down like that.

The Inheritors harassed their flanks and rear, cutting off their escape route or at least making it ten times as difficult to pull back. The Hellcats and the random collection of other mech models held their attention at their front, pinning them down and acting as the anvil to the inevitable hammer that arrived in the form of their starships!

In the Age of Mechs, humans weren't allowed to employ warships armed with fixed gun emplacements. Employing heavy mechs in bunkers was in fact

something of a loophole, but a minor one considering that their weapon caliber didn't exceed what could normally be employed by mechs.

Many military theorists still called to ban this practice entirely. Some purists even stated that ships shouldn't bear any armaments at all, not even the tiny anti-meteorite guns used to crack apart various space debris in their way.

Their voices gained no traction, fortunately. The loophole remained acceptable, so the Vandals would continue to employ this radical tactic of employing their combat carriers as makeshift warships!

The first ships had already approached close enough to enter into medium range. The Castle Breakers attempted to divert their approach by redirecting their available ranged firepower on the incoming ships of the Vandals, but to no avail! Even their heavy firepower needed some time to penetrate the thick outer layers protecting the combat carriers from damage.

"Our Akkara mechs all confirm their targets have entered within their effective medium range, sir! Permission to open fire?"

"Permission granted! Bombard these Castle Breakers into scrap!"

Low booms thundered throughout the entire ship as the Akkara mechs unleashed their heavy cannons. They skipped on the slow-moving explosive rounds and instead focused on unleashing their arsenal of kinetic and laser cannons.

The kinetic slugs propelled to insane speeds hit the Castle Breaker mechs with a force exceeding the punch of a mech! Their better armored mechs gained ugly dents upon impact that disrupted their initial moves. Their lighter mechs plainly broke apart or lost their limbs upon a direct impact!

The laser cannon beams on the other hand landed instantly on the mechs, transferring an incredible amount of energy, melting and vaporizing the mechs at varying rates depending on their armor. The Akkara mechs always

concentrated the fire of their own cannons, bringing two or four massive laser beams to bear on a single mech.

The knight mechs among the Castle Breakers had to abandon their shields because it melted into slag when focused upon by two Akkara mechs, who pointed eight huge laser beams in total against its surface!

Left unprotected by its favorite protective gear, the subsequent volley practically burned through its armor in a matter of seconds. Its pilot hastily ejected from their doomed mech before they burned into ash!

"The Castle Breakers are breaking! Their spaceborn mechs have entered into a rout!"

The intensive bombardment from the Akkara mechs was too much for the elite pirates. Skilled as they were, they were completely in over their heads when they thought they could face a detachment from a military mech regiment in battle. Within the first three minutes upon the entry of the Akkara heavy cannoneers into the battle, the Castle Breakers lost more than fifty spaceborn mechs in quick succession!

Many of their mech pilots managed to eject from their derelict mechs in time, so the actual casualties suffered among them in terms of manpower was fairly low. Nonetheless, the loss of so many costly mechs already crippled their progress for years!

Due to the sheer chaos engulfing the battlefield, the ejected Castle Breaker pilots didn't dare to direct their cockpits to return to their motherships. For better or worse, they had to be left behind to drift away in the wake of the strewn-out debris field that formed a makeshift junk belt around the tiny terrestrial planet in the Mancroft System.

"Sir, the Castle Breaker mechs are fleeing for their lives while their fleet is coursing away from us. Shall we pursue?"

Major Verle faced a bit of a dilemma at this moment. Even though they won this battle easily, it cost a significant amount of time, ammunition and fuel to chase the intact ships of the Castle Breakers. And for what? Breaking their fleet would avail them of some additional spoils, but it took time to process the battlefield and their gains.

Their greater objective lay deep in the frontier, not in this stopover system, Ves thought.

Still, if the Castle Breakers had any involvement in the Starlight Megalodon, then it would be a mistake for the Vandals to let off their prey when they had a knife to their throats.

The Castle Breakers may have lost their entire spaceborn mech contingent, but their landbound mech roster was still intact!

If they combined their forces with an outfit that specialized in spaceborn combat, then they could still become a nuisance to the Vandals later on. The safest and most thorough decision here would be to pursue the fleet and annihilate or force the surrender of their ships.

"We pursue, but cautiously." Major Verle finally decided. "Recover our damaged or fallen mechs and retrieve our ejected mech pilots. Let our combat carriers take the lead. Our Akkara Mechs can safely bombard the Castle Breaker starships without the risk of retaliation. Inform Captain Rakeshir of my intentions."

The fighting may not be done yet, but the battle was essentially over. The Omen of Misfortune was saved and the Castle Breakers had met their inevitable end!

Chapter 677 Broken Castle

In the end, the Castle Breakers started a fight they couldn't win. It wasn't their fault for overestimating the friends the Omen of Misfortune could call upon.

Perhaps the Castle Breakers knew that the Swordmaidens were liable to back up their pals, but they definitely didn't anticipate the Swordmaidens drag along the Flagrant Vandals in their rush to save their allies.

After being chased by a patient, Vandal fleet, suffering a torment of bombardment that riddled their sublight propulsion into wrecks, the elite pirates eventually saw reality and surrendered with what little grace they had left.

In the meantime, the lukewarm forces of the Red Tongs and the Caged had quietly let off the Omen of Misfortune. They returned their mechs to their carriers and slipped their fleet away to the nearest Lagrange point in rapid time, leaving no opportunity for the Vandals to catch up to them and teach them a lesson.

Every Vandal servicemen felt pissed at the Caged for not heeding their initial warning. The Vandals had already been merciful to them when they let off the Caged in favor of annihilating the Masters of Combat, but they learned nothing from their old mistakes.

Hopefully, the Vandals would have the opportunity to corner the Caged and give them their just desserts.

"The frontier may be big, but we'll catch up to you Roppongans sooner or later."

Since the Vandals performed the greater share of the fighting, they left the duty of policing the prisoners and taking their ships into custody to the Swordmaidens. It was the least they could do after dragging the Vandals in a mess that wasn't any of their business from the start.

"The biggest winner by here is the Omen of Misfortune."

Not only did their up-and-coming mech champion the Hellvoice triumphed over the Deathless in a duel, they also managed to annihilate the Castle

Breakers and any chance of retaliation after borrowing the strength of their allies.

Ves had a really foul taste in his mouth at the realization that the Omen of Misfortune basically got away scott-free when they should have felt some pain for their shenanigans.

This warped custom from the frontier which obligated allies to come to the aid to their allies was incredibly prone to abuse. Perhaps the pirates developed their own solutions to this particular problem, but Ves couldn't see any from his limited exposure to the frontier way.

When Ves met with Ketis hours later at his office, he recounted his feelings on the matter to see what she has to say.

"You're blind, teacher." Came her verdict. "Don't you see? You Vandals have proven yourself to be a trustworthy ally! Helping the Omen of Misfortune when you could have ignored our calls for help was an honorable act that will spread from Mancroft and reach the entire Faris Star Sector. Everyone will know that the Vandals and the Swordmaidens are one and the same as long as they travel together."

Ves grudgingly nodded. "That's a benefit, aye, but hasn't this always been the case? The fact is that while we're willing to help the Swordmaidens resolve their own grudges if the battle is winnable, it's another matter entirely when we have to help your other friends."

"Don't underestimate the influence of the Omen of Misfortune. Like us, they have a lot of allies and acquaintances as well. Now that you've saved them from the Castle Breakers, they're obliged to pay back the favor. I think you will find that our journey into the frontier will be slightly easier now that they are in our debt. They excel in intelligence gathering, you know."

"What about the spoils?" he asked. "A lot of mechs got wrecked, and we've managed to capture the Castle Breaker ships mostly intact. What will happen with those?"

She shrugged. "We won't be parsimonious with the spoils. You Vandals contributed the most in the fighting, so your share of it will be the biggest. I think the Omen of Misfortune will surrender all of the claims to the salvage and the prizes, and so will Commander Lydia if you Vandals are pissed for getting caught up in our fight."

Talk of that had already spread throughout the ship. Every servicemen would gain a nice bonus in their bank accounts while the Vandal fleet gained a hefty pool of disposable funds.

After she finished answering his questions, they went to work. Their main duties entailed helping the Vandals processed the damaged and wrecked mechs. In the aftermath of every battle, Ves needed to plan for new repairs and new replacements, and schedule them in the shortest time possible. Right now, they couldn't afford any weakening of their spaceborn mech force.

Much of the work consisted of routine decisions that Ves had already delegated to his deputies and subordinates. It took some extra time to guide Ketis through some of his duties.

She found everything about it boring, of course. "A mech designer isn't an administrator! Why aren't you leaving this to a bureaucrat?"

"A bureaucrat may know numbers, but he doesn't know mechs. As head designer, I not only need to tally the state of our mechs, I am also obliged to draft up a plan to solve our inadequacies. Commissioning new repairs or ordering our mech designers and mech technician to salvage a wreck in bad condition requires an expert's touch."

While non-mech designers could perform the same job that he was doing right now, they would never be as good as Ves. That was because an intricate understanding of mechs was required to allocate mechs efficiently.

The complexity of his responsibilities only grew more burdensome with each mech model the mech regiment employed. For the Flagrant Vandals, that was quite a lot, so Ves actually needed to use his ingenuity and his in depth understanding of mechs to navigate the swamp that was the mech roster of the Flagrant Vandals.

In time, word leaked out of a closed conference between Major Verle, Commander Lydia and the Misfortune Seer. The three top leaders of their respective forces hashed out a quick and dirty deal, of which some of the agreements became public.

"The Omen of Misfortune has agreed to take charge of the mechs and ships the Flagrant Vandals have captured in battle. The spoils officially belong to the Vandals, but the Omen is in charge of liquidating the prices before depositing the proceeds into the financial accounts of the Vandals. The Omen will be rewarded with a five percent cut if they discharge their duties properly, with additional bonuses if they complete their job faster. The Swordmaidens receive a ten percent cut of the total earnings but aren't entitled to any further spoils!"

The deal sounded perfect for the Vandals because they really couldn't afford to stick around. The big ships of the Castle Breakers would be tough to sell, mainly because their size and quality propelled them out of reach of the average outfit commander.

"That's going to be worth quite a few billion bright credits, er, a couple of million K-coins." Ves corrected.

"It's a lot more money than we're used to handling over at the Swordmaidens." The horned mech designer admitted. "They never let me deal with the money accounts, but I know that we rarely get to spend millions of K-coins at once. You're sitting on a massive pile of coins. Where will you spend it all?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. That's up to the brass to decide. However, we have already completed most of our shopping, and our logistics ships are filled to the brim with supplies. The time for shopping is already over. It's time we get a move on into the frontier."

The conflict between the Omen of Misfortune and the Castle Breakers formally came to an end. As far as anyone was aware of, the Castle Breakers were history from now on, as it was unlikely they stashed a second fleet somewhere.

As for the Mancroft Independent Harbor, unrest continued to spill for a day. It took that much time for the Bosey Clan to suppress the rioting pirates and forcefully hack through the faulty programming of their cleaning bots and send out a forceful shutdown command.

The bloodshed was enormous, and most of the treasure hunters had skedaddled out of the star system as fast as humanly possible.

Surprisingly, the pirates hadn't been scared off at all. Besides the departure of a few small-time cowards, the rest remained as if the violent riots and the bots gone postal had just been another tuesday for them. Certainly, these pirates didn't lack for courage.

Of course, the other reason why the pirates stuck around was so that they could board their ships and salvage the remnants from the giant debris field that stretched over the orbit of the terrestrial planet. Neither the Vandals, the Swordmaidens or the Omen bothered the clean up after this trash belt. So

they tacitly gave permission for the bottom feeders to take advantage of the free salvage floating in orbit.

In any case, all three of them had overstayed their welcome in the Mancroft System. The Bosey Clan was not amused with their space battle and the spillover effects of it. Their precious space station had been struck by numerous lasers and other weapons fire while three entire piers got snapped off due to collateral damage.

The Bosey Clan constantly sent out messages to them asking for compensation! The Vandals and the Swordmaidens left the matter of compensation to the Omen of Misfortune, who would be staying in the Mancroft System long enough to get rid of all of their captured ships for a good price.

Ves sighed in relief when he heard that. "I was half afraid the Omen of Misfortune wants to tag along with us. Three is already a crowd."

He didn't need Ketis to tell him that the three leaders came to some sort of backroom deal. No matter how you looked at it, the Flagrant Vandals harvested the majority of the gains.

This was the privilege of strength!

Even after they lost half their mechs and mech pilots throughout their escape from the Vesia Kingdom, they were still a force to be reckoned with. The average large-scale independent pirate gang only fielded two to four companies of spaceborn mechs at most.

Those affiliated with one of the pirate blocs tended to be better off. Still, the only way they could resist the invasion of a mech regiment was by mobbing them with numbers. Ves didn't despise this primitive method because history had already shown plenty of times that pirates working in concert could bleed a prey to death.

In any case, the vast majority of the pirate outfits in the frontier consisted of smaller groups than even the Swordmaidens or the Omen of Misfortune. Single-ship outfits consisting of a single converted carrier and perhaps eight dilapidated mechs comprised the majority of the pirate forces skulking in the Faris Star Region.

These dregs failed to prove their courage or ability and didn't have sufficient wealth to upgrade their forces. They lingered at the edge of bankruptcy and ruin. Even if over a hundred of these outfits combined their forces, the Flagrant Vandals could easily mow them down at once.

As long as the Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't meet an outfit from the Ravienne Alliance or the Dragon Alliance, they could continue to throw their weight around with impunity.

"Hopefully the rest of our competitors are like the Castle Breakers as well. Overconfident and way in over their heads."

After processing all of the matters that needed processing, the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet finally moved out of orbit. They would be departing from the system in half an hour.

Ves remembered that as soon as the fleet entered FTL, they would disable most of their quantum entanglement nodes. At that time, communication with the other ships in the combined fleet would be cut off.

"I should make a call for Mayra before that happens."

Chapter 678 Mech Designer Designer

Ves raised his office privacy shield so that Ketis couldn't listen in. He then called the Swordmaiden Journeyman Mech Designer, who was currently stationed aboard the Jaded Sword. A tired-looking Mayra appeared over the comm.

"Mr. Larkinson! I've heard what happened down on the station from Ketis! I'm glad to see you safe and alive. Thanks for shepherding her out of there. I know she can be a wildcat sometimes."

"No problem, Mayra. I've promised to take her under her wing, so protecting her is par for the course."

She looked hopeful at that. "Did you manage to succeed in getting into my mentor's good graces?"

"Good graces? Maybe... sort of." Ves smiled ruefully at her projection. "I'm not sure he's entirely pleased with me, we're both a little too strong-willed to get along with each other. However, we were both professional enough to set aside our feelings and come to a deal that is mutually beneficial to us. So yes, I've managed to secure what I set out to obtain. My deal with you has become valid as well. On my honor as a mech designer, I will instruct your protege Ketis to the best of my abilities."

"That's fantastic!" Mayra exclaimed. "The old pervert has been in a rather bad mood lately, so it's surprising to hear you managed to worm your way in your heart. Are you willing to share the details of your deal with my mentor?"

Ves could hardly imagine the angry curmudgeon as a jolly old perverted grandfather. The image simply didn't register in his mind.

"I'm sorry, Mayra, but the details are classified. It's in our best interests to let as little people know of what we agreed to as possible. Suffice to say, I think we will both be the better out at the end of the ride."

The Skull Architect warned him in the sternest terms what would happen if they leaked out the deal. Ves had more to lose in this regard, because he really didn't wish to publicize the fact he became a co-designer to a wanted pirate mech designer!

Still, if Mayra paid any attention to her mentor's activities, then the new designs that he published would probably provoke her interest. Since she already studied the work he had performed on the Leiner Grey, she must surely be able to recognize his own work.

Mayra would surely be able to guess what was going on, but that was a matter for later.

She tactfully shifted the topic. "You've already spent a week with Ketis. You even went through a couple of battles with her. What's your impression of her?"

Well, that was a sensitive matter. Ves paused for a moment to gather his thoughts and figure out the best way to describe his analysis without offending the Journeyman.

"Ketis is.. a handful, to say the least. If I may be honest, her education is rather incomplete. She's decent in her theory at her level, but she lacks both practical experience and a wider perspective on what it means to be a mech designer, as you already know. The most important trait I'm missing from her is the raw passion for mech design. She doesn't actually enjoy it enough to make it her life's calling."

This was an old refrain to Mayra. "The fame of a Swordmaiden warrior is much stronger among us than the respect afforded to a mech designer. It's my fault, I think. I didn't make the job attractive enough. I only focused on cramming as much textbook contents in her head as possible. She fought back hard against me sometimes, which may have led to the current situation where she's lukewarm towards mechs."

"She also lacks the institutional upbringing that is common in schools. Every graduate from a university or institution is a rounded mech designer. Not all of them live up to the job, but those that do are able to keep their head on

straight without getting distracted by other priorities. Ketis is far from dedicated to a career in mech design. She still performs her daily sword practice routines for several hours spread out over the day. That's something that I'm trying to get her to tone down."

It would be a struggle, he knew. The values the Swordmaiden instilled when she was in her impressionable teens would always mark her personality. What Ves sought to do was to find a better balance. Anything was better than spending half of her day on sword practice when she could have spent it on improving her mech designs.

"I'm satisfied with what you've observed. I think we both know that motivating her to develop her mech design career is the key to her transformation into a proper mech designer. I've tried years to foster interest in her, but the silly girl is still dreaming to become a warrior. I can only hope a different environment away from her sisters who are constantly encouraging her to join in on sword practice will show her how the rest of the galaxy works."

"It's a sound theory, and I think it has a good chance to succeed." He nodded absently. "Don't worry, Mayra, I'll try my best to win her over to the splendor of mech design. By the time our partnership is at an end, I hope I'll be able to return her to you as a mech designer who can genuinely contribute to the prosperity of your outfit."

They discussed a few other matters, not just about how to educate Ketis, but also their upcoming operation. Mayra definitely knew more about it than Ves, considering she was part of Commander Lydia's inner circle. She passed on some vague hints to Ves for that reason.

"It's uncertain how far we have to travel in order to reach our intended destination." She explained in a light tone. "It could be weeks, it could be months, we might even be driven beyond the outer borders of the Faris Star Region. We'd be entering true uncharted space at that point."

That alarmed Ves a bit. "Is that realistically possible?"

"That's the thing. None of us knows. We are sailing blind in the abyss and only have a single lighthouse to go on for directions. This is uncharted territory for both of our forces. Why do you think it's necessary for your Vandals to work together with my Swordmaidens? Alone, we don't stand a single chance against the perils we might encounter on our journey."

"That sounds... as if our leaders have no idea what they are doing."

"That is more correct than you believe. Yet despite our fears, we have no choice but to advance into the unknown. You'll find out soon enough."

Ves nodded. "After our fleet enters FTL, we'll quickly cross the border demarcating the Komodo Star Sector from the Faris Star Region. Major Verle promised us that we'd hear the full truth by then. Heh, it's easy for them to do so after they cut off all but one of our communication lines to the rest of the galaxy."

Restricting the quantum entanglement nodes meant that the Vandal fleet would also lose access to the central database of the Mech Corps. Only a lesser internal database remained, but it didn't store as much designs, intelligence and other precious data that Ves occasionally referenced.

They would be isolated for real in an area of space where the law of the jungle prevailed. Even a reckless mech designer like Ves shook in his boots at the thought.

The call soon ended after running out of topics to discuss. Even as allies, the Swordmaidens and the Vandals operated their own fleets. Their relationship hadn't grown close enough to share resources, personnel or technology with each other.

Ves soon stared at the lockbox containing his promised goodies. It had been difficult to bring it out of the space station intact, but he succeeded in bringing

the expensive exotics back to his ship, where he could employ them in any way he could. The Vandal workshops were at his disposal.

"First, I need to figure out how to build it. That's not going to be easy."

Just because he got his hands on the key materials didn't mean they comprised of the entire battery. He still needed to go over the research material and figure out a way to turn theories and diagrams into a complete blueprint of an ultracompact battery. One that worked with the materials he had on hand aboard the Shield of Hispania.

Besides that, he also had to spend some time on tinkering with the long-disused stealth shuttle fragments. Letting them rot in some storage box down in the cargo hold was a waste of their potential. Ves figured that the barebones stealth tech primer that the Skull Architect had passed on would be difficult to understand without something practical in his hands.

Lastly, he hadn't forgotten about Ketis nor his regular mech designer duties. Even though it seemed the maintenance department of the fleet pretty much ran on autopilot at this stage, the system that held it together was exceedingly fragile and could easily topple over if they came across a problem that they couldn't solve.

Such situations allowed Ves to show Ketis the value of a mech designer in solving these matters for any outfit.

If Ves couldn't find any problems, then he would instruct her in a more traditional way. He could always tip something over and have Ketis fix the issue if needed, though that would be mean to the mech technicians that worked hard to get everything right.

The feeling of manipulating Ketis and molding her into shape as his ideal form of mech designer enticed him like nothing else. Only designing his original mech designs felt better than this!

"It truly feels as if I am designing a mech designer."

The absurd thought had gained traction in his mind. It sounded weird but oddly fitting for a mech designer in a leading position like him. Ves owned his own mech company, but he failed to expand his design team beyond himself. Sooner or later, he would establish a team of mech designers that could help lighten the design burden for him. Perhaps they might also lend their own brand of expertise to his design!

"The good ones are already hired out even before they graduate. I'll have to settle on the dregs."

Besides attempting to win over his colleagues in the design teams of the Flagrant Vandals, Ves would likely have to pick up some failed mech designers from the street as well.

Metaphorically, of course. A mech designer was still an overqualified mech technician, so it wasn't as if they ever starved on the streets.

Still, these mech designers who had gone bankrupt or who failed to start their own businesses would come with a host of issues. Ves needed to learn how to deal with different personalities, attitudes and aptitude for mech design.

Ketis served as the perfect prototype in his attempt to find out if he had what it took to be a master manipulator.

"That sounds way too nefarious. It's an inaccurate description as well to boot. What can I call myself instead? Mech designer designer? Designer of mech designers?"

Designing mech designers sounded like a paradox to Ves. Humans weren't designed. They were nurtured. Yet his design philosophy centered around the premise that mechs possessed life equivalent to humans.

Therefore, if Ves could design mechs, then it should have been possible to design humans as well.

"That sounds dumb."

A human grew over time, while a mech was static. A human birthed from an embryo in an organic fashion, while mechs needed to be fabricated by assembling mechanical parts.

Just because Ves drew them on the same height in terms of intrinsic value didn't mean that humans should literally be treated like mechs.

A better analogy would be to equate the teaching and nurturing of a mech designer to the modification of an existing mech. No matter if it was a cheap mech, an expensive mech, a tall mech, or a short mech, as long as the mech designer possessed some skill, he could reshape it in any other form he wanted, to a certain degree.

"Hm, maybe calling myself a teacher will do."

Chapter 679 Drift On A Chartless, Resistless Sea

As soon as the Flagrant Swordmaidens transitioned into FTL, a preplanned series of actions took place.

First, every ship except for the Jaded Sword and the Shield of Hispania effectively trashed their quantum entanglement nodes. They decisively trashed a score of the expensive, fragile devices worth at least 100 million bright credits for the cheapest versions.

Ves had to wince at the thought. Trashing so much quantum entanglement nodes meant that both forces needed to spend billions in bright credits to replace the modules after they returned from the frontier.

"It's a good thing we raided the Castle Breakers. Selling their surviving ships and mechs should earn us more than enough to compensate for the cost of replacing the nodes."

Because each ship traveled through FTL, they had no way of communicating with each other outside of exiting FTL. A new set of protocols came into force. Something like martial law came into effect where servicemen needed to be more careful of what they blathered out of their mouths and where the officers began to enforce discipline more strictly.

They were truly alone in the stars, at least when the ship plunged into the higher dimensions of FTL travel. Strange things happened when ships became isolated for long stretches of time. Even if the vast majority of the rank and file were never allowed access to the galactic net, the thought that their higher ups still let the rest of the galaxy know they were alive served as a comfort to the Vandals.

Losing this safety blanket made the Vandals nervous and restless. How would you think if you were stuck on a boat that was flung across many lightyears away from the nearest human-occupied star system?

Isolation bred madness. Everybody knew that. Sure, the Vandals could cope by socializing with each other, but their nerves and their anxieties might grow to an uncontrollable level. Illusions and hallucinations might start to settle in among their worst. The darkness of space might creep up to them, surrounding them in a miasma of terror and the endless black night.

Darkness. Empty. Alone.

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is the fear of the unknown."

A common superstition among spacers and the spaceborn was that terrors lurked in the dimensions that most physicists thought was empty or filled with formless energy. The dominant form of FTL travel that their race stole from the aliens worked by breaching beyond the four material dimensions.

Though many smart people claimed to know what happens in these higher dimensions, nobody truly knew. It wasn't as if they could take a recording from the observation deck, because what was visible from inside the ship simply couldn't be perceived by human or electronic eyes.

It might be that every vessel that plunged into FTL was blissfully swimming in a dimensional sea surrounded by enormous planet-sized alien horrors, each possessing enough power that a single sneeze was enough to snuff the life of a star!

Though these figments of imagination sounded silly to a sober person, long isolation in space tended to lead spacers into darker train of thoughts.

These space horrors didn't exist, did they?

...did they?

A shudder ran through his back. Just because they couldn't prove the existence of these gigantic alien space tyrants, didn't mean they never existed. Maybe human means and technology simply hadn't developed yet to the point where they could force these sleeping terrors into view.

The act of waking them up from their endless slumber may in fact announce the end of the existence of the human race.

The insatiable curiosity of humanity for the unknown would ensure such an event came to pass.

Death. Lifeless. Nonexistent.

"That is not dead which can eternal lie, and with strange aeons even death may die."

BONK!

"Ouch! What was that for, Ketis?!"

Ves turned around his spinny chair to face the naughty little Swordmaiden, who guiltily withdrew her offending fist that had playfully bumped against his skull.

"You were daydreaming or something, teach. There was a funny look on your face and all, and you started muttering about death and crap like that. That's not funny at all."

He sighed. "Don't call me a teacher if you don't intend to treat me like one. Haven't you learned how to respect your teachers?"

She shrugged. "Hey, when I'm feeling energetic, I sometimes hit up Mayra for a spar or two. She doesn't look like it, but she's a nasty kicker with her legs."

Ves palmed his face. This time, it was safe, since they both shed their extravagant suits of armor and returned to their normal uniforms. Ves in his dark green mech designer uniform, and Ketis with her vacsuit and exobeast pelt combo.

"I'll have to add some extra lessons to your schedule, then. I know it's a faint hope, but I hope you can get around to living like a mech designer from civilized space."

A snort escaped from her nose. Her sneer made it abundantly clear what she thought about the soft and weak nerds who spend every waking moment of their lives in some stuffy design studio drafting endless sketches or performing complex mathematical calculations for their next simulations.

Such an image hardly appealed to her at all. Ves knew that he had a long way to go before he could drag her kicking and screaming towards the light.

He looked down on his comm, which faintly displayed a clock. It is almost time for the general meeting. They're finally going to tell us what this operation is all about. I've been told that you're not allowed to attend, so you're going to have to fend for yourself for now.

"Who told you that?!"

"Just sit here and wait for me to bring back the news. I'll pass on anything to you that isn't classified."

Ves left the scowling Swordmaiden mech designer behind and marched over to the conference room. It was packed to bursting this time, and because almost every quantum entanglement node was down, every person present was a living breathing human.

Because the conference room couldn't possibly fit the entire crew, not to mention that it would have been reckless gathering each and everyone of them in a single vulnerable location, the rank and file would be informed of the essentials by their immediate superiors who were currently present in this room.

An unprecedented air of serious fell among Major Verle and the Vandal cadre.

The import of the situation dawned upon each of them. None of the Vandals present were stupid. They saw the hints of what was coming, and might have extrapolated what might be in store for them. There couldn't be that many reasons why the battered and diminished Verle task force needed to be sent to the frontier instead of the frontlines of the latest Bright-Vesia War.

"Ladies and gentlemen, fellow Vandals," Major Verle began. "The time has come for you to learn the nature of our clandestine operation. I have carefully held this secret close to my chest along with a small number of officers because of the sensitive and outlandish nature of the mission. Even now, I am only allowed to illuminate a small part of what we are after and why we must enter the frontier."

The conference room dimmed, and a projection came to life.

Ves knew this image. He knew it well.

"T-That's a CFA battleship!"

"She's an old one." A ship officer said. "I recognize this style. She's several hundred years old. They don't make battleships like they used to these days."

The bold lettering on her sides revealed the august name of this venerable creation.

"The Starlight Megalodon." Someone whispered. "Isn't that an old wife's tale? The missing battleship? She's gone off the deep end two or three hundred years ago."

The Starlight Megalodon. A fully-fledging capital ship whose main guns could crack a moon and whose superweapons possessed enough might to fracture a terrestrial planet. This was not just a weapon of the stars. It was a weapon capable of bringing enough firepower to match the flare of a star down on a single target.

She was a hammer in the hands of the Common Fleet Alliance, meant to hammer down the nails that represented the stubborn alien races that lived in the periphery just outside human-occupied space.

Just like other human ships, her hull was shaped like a fish or a reptile without limbs or fins. Long, perhaps a little fat, but not wide enough to present a huge profile when facing the front, the battleship ranged at least eleven kilometers long.

Her main cannon emplacements jutted out from almost every direction. No matter what direction she faced, she could at least bring a single main cannon to bear upon her opponent.

Her armament layout might not have been the most efficient in terms of offensive power, but she was built like a cosmic brick. The most amazing feat was that her entire eleven-kilometer exterior was clad in the highest-quality compressed armor plating!

The sheer amount of medium and high-grade exotics used in the mass-fabrication of the armor plates would have been enough to upgrade every mech in the Bright Republic with high-quality compressed armor!

And that was just one estimate. A more ridiculous estimate stated that the Starlight Megalodon carried enough compressed armor to clad the Friday Coalition's entire mech roster with the substance!

These unfounded estimates illustrated the sheer extravagance put into their construction. With a strong emphasis on defence, the Starlight Megalodon served as a defensive bulwark as well as a battering ram to any fleet centered around her presence.

Major Verle smoothly picked up after the alarm died down. "This is the CFA's Starlight Megalodon. Let me tell you why this missing battleship is relevant to our operation."

Their commanding officer briefly described what Ves already heard or derived from Calabast's spiel. Nothing in their explanation diverged very much. They both stated that the Starlight Megalodon had long been presumed missing, but that descendants in FTL-capable shuttles randomly popped up in the frontier for some reason.

The major skipped the part about the encrypted data chips and their necessity in tracking down the current location of the derelict battleship. He simply stated that the Vandals and the Swordmaidens combined possessed the means of navigating towards that hidden treasure.

Everyone still sat stunned in their seats as the revelations surpassed every rumor that had been bandied about by bored spacers with an overactive imagination.

The major finally came to the part where he declared their actual objective. "Make no mistake. The Starlight Megalodon is a vault of technology that the

Bright Republic still hasn't mastered despite several hundred years of progress. If we can obtain a smidgeon of their tech library, we can advance the Mech Corps by leaps and bounds! Our primary objective for this excursion is the Starlight Megalodon's primary data banks!"

Pretty much everyone bought it hook, line and sinker. If Ves hadn't heard the cynical truth from Calabast, maybe he would have fallen for it as well. Right now, Ves faked an expression of shock and puzzlement on his face. It wouldn't do for the Vandals to find out he already knew the dirty details well before the rest of the crew got to learn the truth!

"The foundation of human civilization is the technology that we master. Yet is it fair for the CFA, MTA and the first-rate superstates to hoard their technological superiority from us?! Just because we are situation near the edge of the galaxy doesn't make us the refuse pit of the human race! We deserve a fair share of the technological spoils, and if the galactic center is too conceited to give us a leg up, then we will take it from their forgotten ship! Do you know why? Because we are the Flagrant Vandals, and we take what is ours!"

"We take what is ours!" The rest of the crowd echoed the motto.

Ves refrained from joining in. He wasn't a genuine Vandal, after all. The rest would excuse him for holding back while the rest were swept up in the fervor of robbing a derelict battleship from the CFA.

He keenly noted that Major Verle never mentioned anything about the life-prolonging serums and medicines even once. The topic of side objectives that boarding parties would grab as 'targets of opportunity' was the most he had to say about that.

The mech officer couldn't let the rank and file know they were about to risk their lives so that some old geezer back in the Republic wanted to live a few hundred years longer.

Chapter 680 Rebuked

The meeting unfolded exactly according to his expectations. The brass saw fit to explain the bare necessities to the lower ranks. Feed them enough information to clear the doubt in their minds, but not too much that they would start asking questions again.

The matter about the life-prolonging serums never came up as a focal point of the conversation. In fact, Verle never even released those words from his lips in the first place!

The rest of the meeting devolved into a lecture on the policy changes, the need to keep the rank and file calm and complacent, and the possibility of encountering a pirate ambush at every FTL transition.

"Make no mistake. We are traversing the true breadth of lawless space. The Mech Corps has always recommended that only entire mech divisions are strong enough to withstand the predation of the pirates and the sandmen in the Faris Star Region. Since our combined allied force is far short of matching the firepower of ten-thousand mechs, we shall have to lean on the connections and expertise of Lydia's Swordmaidens to tide us through the untamed stars."

Shortly after that, Major Verle dismissed his cadre and ordered them to return to their stations to enlighten their subordinates with a shortened version of his spiel.

The secret was truly out now.

"Mr. Larkinson, a moment if you will." The major called out.

As the other officers and chiefs left the conference room, Ves was left alone with the major. He had no idea why the mech officer called him out specifically this time. Did the man suspect that Ves had spoken with Calabast? He might land in hot water if that were true.

"Lieutenant Nolsen Feray told me that you spent your time on Mancroft Station pursuing private pursuits. By private pursuits, I mean objectives that have no discernable relation to your current responsibilities as head designer of this task force. What do you have to say for yourself?"

If Ves was still the slightly fresh-faced rookie mech designer who arrived aboard the Vandal fleet at the start, he would have stammered or put out some lame excuse or something. The guilt would be evident in his expression.

It was different now. He became a lot more jaded after being exposed to the realities of how the different parts of the galaxy was run. The fleet's entry into the frontier only emphasized the fact that Ves was moving to a place far removed from the ideals he held at the start of his service.

So his chosen form of response was to be nonchalant about his indiscretions. He disrespectfully shrugged his shoulders and plainly spoke out his reasons.

"With all the danger I've been subjected to lately, I feel that I need to increase my ability to preserve my life. It's not that I don't trust the Vandals, but they are first and foremost a mech regiment geared for raiding and harassment operations. At best, they can moonlight as a mixed reconnaissance unit. The fact of the matter is that you Vandals are ill-suited to face the many unorthodox threats we have barely overcome up to now and that we will continue to face in the frontier."

If Major Verle was expecting an excuse, he didn't expect this kind of answer delivered in this manner.

"We may have let you down a few times, Mr. Larkinson. I admit that you have saved us just as much as we saved you, but that is the nature of service. I cannot have you run around pursuing your private errands while your official duties to the Vandals is starting to backslide. Some mech designers have expressed concerns that you are spending less and less attention to your basic duties. You are failing the expectations we have placed on your shoulders."

Urgh. Ves knew exactly who these unmentioned-by-name mech designers were. Mercator or Trozin or both had stabbed him in the back yet again. Perhaps he needed to sic Ketis on them and tell the enthusiastic Swordmaiden that they have volunteered themselves for sparring practice.

"Major Verle," Ves breathed deeply. "Before you believe the words of political animals in the form of mech designers, perhaps you should ask your chief technicians and the other mech designers what they think about my leadership. You'll undoubtedly hear that the situation is well in hand, and that my well-crafted schedules and timetables is keeping the entire maintenance department on track with finishing the high-g modifications to the landbound mechs within a standard month. If you place any of the other overconfident mech designers in my position, they'll almost certainly falter and screw up, delaying the modification work by at least a month, if not two."

Major Verle had no way of confirming his retort at this moment, but he was sure to follow through in his investigation.

Ves wasn't worried. He might have embellished some matters here and there, but the fact that the mech designers and mech technicians all worked at high levels of productivity couldn't be denied.

"So you claim that the design teams and the maintenance department can do just fine without you? Doesn't that make your position redundant?"

"I'm a delegator, not a micromanager." Ves calmly replied. "Every mech designer is kind of a geek by nature. That doesn't necessarily make them good leaders, but they are perfectly capable of following a set list of instructions if presented with one. My leadership style is to draft those instructions beforehand, implementing several what-ifs scenarios and I've incorporated some decision trees if they ever face the issues I've predicted beforehand. If they can't handle a problem, they've been instructed to kick them upstairs. As the mech designer at the top, I'm always ready to tackle the thorniest issues that crop up."

This was the way he ran his current posting and it was also how he ran the LMC. An argument could be made about the merits of this hands-off leadership style that depended heavily on delegation to keep the entire machine running.

Sometimes, a problem started small in the early stages, but snowballed into a complete calamity by the time it came to the attention of Ves. Other times, a chronic problem became a serious issue, but never escalated to the point where his subordinates brought it up to his attention despite dealing massive damage over time.

Ves simply consoled himself that he would make a thorough inspection once a month or something. With so many side projects demanding his time, he didn't feel the need to babysit the Vandals that much anymore.

His short meeting with Major Verle ended on a slightly disharmonious note. He made it clear that the Vandals were aware of his distractions and lack of attention to his core duties. All the while their combined fleet was traveling through one of the most perilous parts of space.

For his part, Ves spoke some platitudes about being more attentive to his duties. He intended to follow through with that statement, too, though in truth it was mostly lip service. His current responsibilities hardly required more

attention than he already gave them. He expressly arranged matters so that he would be able to affect the most change with the least amount of work.

"I am one of the most productive mech designers in this fleet." He boasted shamelessly, and even employed his Spirituality to enhance his aura of sincerity. "There is nothing I care about more than to insure that we make it to the Starlight Megalodon alive."

Ves displayed the appropriate amount of surprise and uncertainty at the mention of the battleship's name. He acted just like someone who had just heard about the lost ship for the very first time.

Verle placed a hand on his shoulder. "The Starlight Megalodon won't be found so easily, and we will meet plenty of dangers along the road. The most acute threat comes from a handful of outfits who are in the possession of the same information that we've obtained. Every meter of the Starlight Megalodon is a treasure to us. Prepare yourself and prepare our mechs for what may arguably the hardest battles in the war."

Ves stared at the mech officer's solid back as he marched out of the conference room with a stoic gait. "I'm not the only one who is shouldering everyone's expectations."

He couldn't quite figure out whether he successfully fooled Major Verle. He didn't even know if the mech officer forgave him for his recent inattentiveness.

Despite his lackadaisical attitude towards his official duties, he very much looked forward to his impending transfer, which sounded by all accounts like a promotion.

"I can't ruin my opportunity by slacking off at the last moment."

He mentally shifted his own schedule around so he spent a little more hours on his so-called duties and a little less time on his side projects. He hadn't abandoned any of the latter, though. Completing them yielded him a vast

understanding of many new matters and directly enhanced his ability to survive whatever the frontier threw at him. Ves was determined to survive his second excursion to the frontier!

He left the conference room and returned to his regular office compartment and met an irate and impatient Ketis. He did as promised and gave her the rundown of the hunt for the Starlight Megalodon.

"Hey wait a moment." She spoke, furrowing her brow due to the shock of the news. "So what you're saying is that the Vandals and the Swordmaidens and some other outfits found traces of a crashed but INTACT battleship, and they think they can just rob it blind while keeping the CFA out of the loop? Are they crazy?!"

"Hush now. Don't raise your voice. I know it sounds dubious. I'm holding back a lot of questions on my own. However, in sensitive operations such as this, it's not wise to voice out too much of your doubts. We have to trust in our superiors and make sure they can rely on us to follow their orders. Do you understand? You have to be a good soldier to Mayra and the rest."

She understood the seriousness of the matter when phrased in that particular way.

"Okay. Whatever you say, teach. By the way, isn't it about time for you to teach me something? I've been spending my time with you Vandals for more than a week, and practically everyone I've met on this vessel so far is either a brute or a boor! I'm bored!"

Ves sighed. "I suppose that's another matter I've neglected. Sit down. Let's have a discussion today."

They both sat down at their seats. Ves called up a diagram of the incomplete Caesar Augustus variant that she had recently worked on. "Remember this?"

"Yeah." She instantly scowled. "That hybrid knight is one of the most awful designs I've ever worked upon."

"Describe to me your biggest frustration with this design."

"It's that overstuffed internal structure! Whoever came up with this design is a moron who wants to have it all for his design but doesn't have the space to stuff it inside the frame! It's a miracle the mech is barely able to work at its basic state."

Her frustrations echoed his own back then. "You should cut Jason Kozlowski some slack. This was his first original mech design and he published it amid great expectations. Although his first published design fell flat within the mech industry, he eventually managed to climb back up and went on to have a successful mech design career. He's accomplished far more than what you achieved at your age."

"Didn't you tell me he some kind of rich playboy who's backed by his daddy's company? If I had his advantages, I could have designed a mech that's ten times better than that monstrosity!"

Ves shook his head. "It's easy to boast. If you are so certain about that, why not prove it to me? I'll put you into a virtual workshop and let you go to town with a set of stock component licences. Will you be able to cobble together a mech design that's at least equal to the Caesar Augustus?"

She fell silent at that. Of course she couldn't back up her words.

"Designing your first original mech is an intimidating process that has halted many young mech designers in their tracks. Yet it is the first hurdle they must overcome if they wish to achieve greater things." Ves leaned forward over his desk and stared at Ketis with eyes burning with intensity. "My plan is to whip you into shape and make you ready to design your debut original mech!"