

### Chapter 721 Undue Deference

The Gorgon's Gaze. The combat carrier of the Flagrant Vandals possessed the unique distinction of hosting an expert pilot and his exclusive custom mech. Even now, Venerable Rixt O'Callahan rested in peaceful stasis in a highly-secured compartment next to the Parallax Star's exclusive mech stables.

The Parallax Star itself laid dormant ever since its latest deployment against the Frosty Meteors. Miss Lisbeth and her ilk performed the necessary repairs, but hadn't worked on it since, which was a rarity for her crew.

In fact, if Ves was reading the status reports correctly, her entire department practically idled about these days. They achieved nothing productive and basically polished the same old pile of spare parts that would likely never see any use now that Venerable O'Callahan was lying in his deathbed.

As much as Ves wanted to exert his authority as head designer and allocate Miss Lisbeth and the mech technicians under her charge to servicing the other mechs of the Gorgon's Gaze, they were specialists who only excelled in servicing high-quality mechs. Putting them in charge of cheap, mass-produced mechs like the Inheritor or all the other random mech models the Vandals collected over the years would only lead to a disaster.

Still, despite his dislike for Miss Lisbeth and Chief Keys, no other mech designer or chief technician could match their capabilities when it came to servicing expert mechs. Anyone else who tried would probably botch something up or become affected by mental contamination.

Once he received his new assignment, Ves led Ketis out of the command center and ordered her to pack some of her luggage. With the arrival of Venerable Xie and the Pale Dancer, his presence would be sorely needed at

the Gorgon's Gaze. He did not feel reassured at all if he left the expert mech alone in the hands of Miss Lisbeth.

"You really don't like this Lisbeth, do you, teacher?" Ketis asked as they boarded a shuttle reserved for their use.

The Flagrant Swordmaiden Fleet accelerated hard in order to reach the fleeing Rovista Splendor, but that did not prevent them from exchanging supplies and personnel between their ships.

The shuttle soon lifted off after they strapped themselves in. The vehicle exited the hangar bay and swiftly engaged its sublight propulsion.

"Miss Eta-Denmersken is a mech designer who bends too eagerly to the demands of our old expert pilot. If Venerable O'Callahan told her to graft eighteen arms on his mech, she would faithfully carry out his instructions even if it sounds completely ridiculous. I don't know whether she's incapable of standing up for herself or if she's crazy from the start. If the latter is the case, then I have to be there to sort her out."

Ketis turned to Ves, though their thick suits of armor hindered that motion somewhat. Because the Flagrant Swordmaidens were still on high alert, none of them dared to shed their armor. Even the shuttle pilot and the handful of security officers adorned themselves in combat armor as well.

In fact, the only person on the shuttle who didn't wear any visible suits of armor was the uninvited guest. The invisible and completely unnoticeable shape of Acolyte Villis stood quietly behind the crash seat that enveloped Ves.

"Didn't you emphasize over and over again that mech designers ought to serve mech pilots?" She asked. "Why is that suddenly such a bad thing?"

"Just because the mech designer's creed is phrased that way doesn't mean you need to interpret it as an absolute." He explained. "It expresses an ideal, and is not meant to be taken as a literal command. In a mech regiment like

the Flagrant Vandals, an existing hierarchy already exists which describes the appropriate roles for every mech designer and every mech pilot. Even though we are part of a separate hierarchy and only loosely attached to the Vandals, we still obey our orders from the people upstairs."

"Uhhh.. what?"

Ves puffed out a tired breath. "Okay, let me put it in a simple way. Miss Lisbeth is supposed to report to me. I am supposed to report to Professor Velten. The professor in turn reports to Colonel Lowenfield. However, because we are detached from the main element of the Flagrant Vandals, our resident Senior is many light-years away from this fleet, so I am instead reporting to the nearest applicable authority figure, which happens to be Major Verle."

"Major Verle is your boss, then."

"He's also a mech officer, so he ticks the box as far as the mech designer's creed is concerned. If a head designer like me follows the orders of some rank-and-file mech pilot, then that is simply upside-down. Yet that is exactly what took place on board the Gorgon's Gaze. Miss Lisbeth acted improper by deferring to Venerable O'Callahan instead of me. Venerable O'Callahan didn't defer to anyone at all and instead acted like the sovereign of his own little fief that he carved out aboard the Gorgon's Gaze. The end result is that neither I or Major Verle exerted effective control over their unit."

"That sounds screwed up." She frowned, unable to reconcile the resolute and authoritative Ves to a wimp who let the dysfunctional situation aboard the Gorgon's Gaze fester under his watch. "Why didn't you do anything?"

"Because Venerable O'Callahan is a bastard of an expert pilot. He had us by the balls." Ves declared with some vehemence.

Ketis visibly leaned away from Ves when he uttered that statement. "Aren't expert pilots compared to demigods? Everyone treats them like they are made out of exotics!"

"Just because they are part of a rare club doesn't mean they have shed their inherent humanity. Demigods. Haven't you heard of the old pre-space tales about demigods? They are as fallable as any human, maybe even more so as their strength and authority allows them to get away with nearly any misdeeds!"

In fact, the gods related to them behaved even worse.

"Then.. how should we treat expert pilots, if not with reverence?"

"Treat them according to their official rank. Just as there are bad expert pilots, there are also good ones. You may not have heard of my family, but my lineage has spawned quite a number of expert pilots in our past. Those who have been brought up with the right principles are worth your respect."

Ketis fell silent. She couldn't process his advice. It went too far against the grain that every human learned.

Even sa daughter of the frontier who grew up in a region of space that hosted very few expert pilots, she still worshipped the mech pilots who were capable of performing superhuman feats with their mechs. They were the ultimate expressions of strength that the sons and daughters of the frontier worshipped so much!

Ves understood that the frontier partially internalized some of the values and principles the MTA and CFA. The pirates may have broken some small rules, but they haven't brandished any weapons of mass destruction or developed any warships armed with large-caliber weapons powerful enough to obliterate a planet.

The pirates generally refrained from engaging in such forbidden development because they feared the CFA would send out a warfleet and stomp them out.

Even if certain pirate factions developed taboo technology, they'd do so in a clandestine fashion and would never show off their dangerous toys in public.

On the other hand, the MTA's reverence towards expert pilots fit neatly in the perspective that strength should be the ultimate arbiter of power. In fact, Ves heard rumors that the reason why the Ravienne Alliance and the Dragon Alliance reigned supreme in the Faris Star Region was because both of them elevated expert pilots as their highest leaders!

"I don't want to dictate what you are supposed to think." Ves lied. He decided that Ketis needed a firmer push in the right direction as she still struggled to make up her mind even now. "I just want you to avoid Miss Lisbeth's example. You'll see what I mean when we're about to meet her once we arrive at the Gorgon's Gaze."

A few minutes later, the shuttle finally arrived at its destination. Once the craft touched down on the flight deck of the combat carrier, the hatch slid open, allowing the armored forms of Ves, Ketis and a pair of floating coffers to depart. As soon as they stepped clear, the shuttle closed its hatch and lifted off a few moments later.

A mech pilot garbed in a piloting suit with officer bars on her shoulder walked up to the pair. "Mr. Larkinson? I am Lieutenant Sara Koltov. I've been assigned to arrange your temporary stay on board our lovely combat carrier."

"Please allow us to drop off our luggage. Do you know how when the Venerable Xie and the Pale Dancer arrives at this ship?"

The lieutenant who looked to be in her thirties shook her head, disturbing her cropped raven hair. "Command has informed me that the Rovista Splendor's

dwindling mech reserves are fully engaged in repelling the Fire Treaders from overtaking the flagship. Venerable Xie is still engaged in battle."

"He lost his Meridian Echo against the Fire Treaders. He's not piloting an expert right now, is he?"

"No. He's currently risking his life in a standard-issue rifleman mech."

That sounded bad to Ves and the Vandals, because Venerable Xie would never be able to perform much better than an extremely skilled advanced pilot. Limited by his hardware, the expert pilot wouldn't be able to save himself if the Fire Treaders overpowered him again through sheer numbers!

As the three headed towards the upper decks, Ves asked for another update on what went on outside the ship. For some reason, Lieutenant Kotlov was awfully well-informed for her rank. "How is the Rovista Splendor holding up?"

"She's heavily-damaged and practically falling apart. On top of that, the Fourth Prince ordered his crew to overload her sublight propulsion. Her engines and thrusters are pretty much burning themselves out in order to stay out of the clutches of the Fire Treader pursuit force. It works, because any mech heavier than a light mech isn't able to keep up the chase. The only threat the Rovista Splendor has to worry about are the light mechs that Venerable Xie is extremely good at shooting down."

The Fourth Prince certainly acted decisively. By overloading the Splendor's propulsion, his survival as well as the survival of his crew would be assured. Yet the fateful order also consigned the Splendor to ruin.

This completely cut off the Fourth Prince's autonomy. Without a ship of his own, he became completely dependent on the goodwill of the Flagrant Swordmaidens who agreed to host the fallen royal and his remaining loyalists.

"Monarchies are pretty dumb." Ves couldn't help but express his enlightened Brighter heritage to his student. "Ketis, if you ever find yourself in a state that

has adopted a feudal system of governance, don't come close to anyone that stinks of royalty or nobility. The games they play can set you on a path to doom even if you don't do anything wrong."

"They're loaded with money, though. I hear they throw bags of money at any decent mech designer!"

He laughed. "That's because any decent mech designer can earn a lot more money by running their own business. Working for others is easy money, but the moment you accept a salary, you give up your right to determine your life and your career. Your employer is in total control over your life. That's not such a bad thing to most people, but mech designers shouldn't let others run their lives."

That gave Ketis a lot of food for thought. Ves sneakily implied that she shouldn't be so slavishly devoted to Lydia's Swordmaidens. Certainly, the gang was a paradise to her, but most pirate gangs never tended to last very long.

The constant fighting and deprivation they endured eventually wore away the best of them. Even the Dragons of the Void and Ravienne's Ravagers came into power after their formerly dominant predecessors kicked the bucket.

Gangs and outfits prospered and died every day, but a mech designer's legacy lasted forever.

### **Chapter 722 Preparing to Receive**

The embers of a previous struggle smouldered in the Ermeghast System. Normally empty and desolate save for an orange dwarf and a couple of anemic planets, it currently hosted five different forces!

The Shining Stars Colonization Fleet from the Dark Plasma Star Sector arrived in the greatest number of ships. Searching for hope and a new beginning, they fell victim to the twin threats of the frontier.

The Fire Treaders, wild beasts and dogs in human form, preyed upon the colonists and exiles with contemptuous ease. The defending mechs of the colonists, which mostly consisted of the former household guards loyal to the Fourth Prince of a far-away kingdom, fell by weight of sheer numbers from the pirates.

The Fire Treaders pillaged what they could and burned what they couldn't, revelling in the pleasure of spreading more chaos and anarchy with their short-sighted actions! They have incurred many enemies with their destructive habits, but they always found their way back into the territory of the Ravienne Alliance when targeted by a larger force.

The mid-sized sandmen fleet that popped up in the Ermeghast System had taken both by surprise. While the alien force failed to catch up to the two human fleets, they did manage to lay claim to the immobile debris field composed of the broken mechs and ships of the former colonization fleet.

Whatever valuable energy or materials they contained became the spoils of war from this scavenging alien fleet. Even the aggressive Fire Treaders lacked the courage to provoke the sandmen fleet. It was not because they thought they would lose, but because the 'ships' composed of sand-like material simply couldn't burn!

What was the fun of bullying such a boring race of aliens that largely resembled bots rather than true sentients? That aside, the Fire Treaders didn't possess an overwhelming advantage, so they would certainly become crippled after fighting a mutually destructive battle.

The Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet arrived late to the party. If they emerged out of FTL only a single day sooner, they might have been able to rescue the exiles from the Palast Kingdom for a hefty price.

Nonetheless, the Fourth Prince and his ragged band of survivors were still able to offer up their most valuable asset in the fleet. Even their colonization ship including their 'cargo' of two-hundred thousand colonists frozen in cryosleep paled in comparison to the most valuable asset of this fallen royal.

His expert pilot!

Any expert pilot was a treasure to an outfit. In fact, many pirate gangs, mercenary corps and other private sector outfits generally couldn't afford to employ an expert pilot! Merely funding the development and fabrication of a fully-customized cost as much as an entire combat carrier!

Though an expert pilot added to an outfit's strength, they also formed an enormous drain on their finances. The only way an outfit would be able to sustain the employment of an expert was to enter into lucrative but exceedingly risky contracts. Such jobs often turn out to be extremely lethal to the rank-and-file, with only the expert pilot able to guarantee their own life.

Therefore, to most self-sustained outfits, it made no financial sense to hire an expert pilot.

Only outfits sponsored by states or large organizations were able to carry the financial burden of doing so. The Flagrant Vandals may have acquired a foul taste when they paid a literal fortune to lure Venerable O'Callahan in their clutches, but the old man had reached the end of his expiration date.

The Vandals needed a new replacement if they wanted to stay in the exclusive club of military mech regiments that boasted at least one expert pilot among their ranks. Getting kicked out of this enviable club meant that the Vandals risked annihilation each time they engaged elements of an enemy mech regiment in battle.

In fact, the Vandals already tasted such a calamity when they captured Venerable Relia Foster in Vesian space!

Despite the facts that the young female expert pilot advanced in the middle of the battle and piloted bog-standard training mechs, she still managed to massacre scores of skilled Vandal mech pilots!

The Flagrant Vandals never quite recovered from the trauma they acquired from that pyrrhic victory.

Therefore, even if Venerable Xie was a second-hand bargain bin product among mech pilots, the desperate Flagrant Vandals still wanted to welcome him with open arms!

As for Lydia's Swordmaidens? As a pirate gang, they simply didn't have the money to support him in the first place. The fact that Xie was very obviously a man also repelled the Swordmaidens who only fielded female mech pilots as an ironclad rule.

That said, rescuing the Fourth Prince and his final retainers still benefited the Swordmaidens. While the Vandals got the expert pilot, the Swordmaidens received almost all of Prince Hixt-Klaaster's remaining liquid assets. The ponce hadn't been completely unprepared and stored a large amount of K-coins, K-bars and even K-slates in the Rovista Splendor's vault to fund a vigorous colonization effort.

The Prince promised to hand over nearly the entire contents of his vault to the Swordmaidens if they saved him! The Swordmaidens stood to gain enough Kavenite to double their effective strength if they spent it all!

The tragic flight of the Rovista Splendor illustrated the dire straits in which the once-great Shining Stars Colonization Fleet ended up in. The expensive combat carrier bore the scars and hull breaches that spoke of intensive combat, and currently attempted to burn its entire propulsion to accelerate a little bit faster.

The two cargo haulers that carried vital supplies for kick starting a new colony simply couldn't keep up. The relentless mechs of the Fire Treaders easily overtook the sluggish vessels and forced them to a stop. Their crews and their cargo both became the pirate gang's spoils of war.

Yet even after securing such precious cargo, the Fire Treaders still hungered for more. Light mechs nipped at the heels of the *Rovista Splendor*. Those armed with rifles harassed the desperately fleeing flagship with a constant barrage of long-ranged potshots.

Though they could have caught up with the combat carrier, the vanguard of the Fire Treaders restrained themselves from crossing an invisible line. Any light mech approached too close to the *Rovista Splendor* would be struck by unerringly accurate fire from the mech piloted by Venerable Xie.

If nothing else, Xie's unerring accuracy alone was worth his weight in monoexurite!

As the *Rovista Splendor's* desperate flight kept her out of the clutches of the Fire Treaders long enough to enter the protective envelope of the *Flagrant Swordmaidens*, the looming threat diminished.

The Fire Treaders may be daring, but they weren't suicidal. The vanguard mechs of the pirates stood no chance against the combined patrols of the *Swordmaidens* and the *Vandals*. The latter force especially possessed enough mechs and firepower to stomp their main fleet!

Therefore, at some point, the Fire Treaders meekly cancelled their pursuit and pulled their forces back.

With the sandmen fleet in the distance appropriating the spoils that should have been theirs, the sullen Fire Treaders began to navigate towards the nearest exit. Squeezed between the *Flagrant Swordmaidens* on one side and

the sandmen fleet on the other side, a modest pirate gang like theirs wouldn't be able to obtain any profits in the Ermeghast System!

"The trash knows where it belongs." Ves muttered as he waited on the flight deck of an exclusive hangar bay formerly reserved for Venerable O'Callahan's use.

Standing next to him, Ketis fidgeted in her boots. Her attention span was never very long, and she longed to grab the floating scabbard hovering behind her back to perform some impromptu sword practice.

To the other side stood the dastardly duo that used to drive Ves mad to the point of tearing out his raven hair.

Ves had little to say about Chief Leo Keys. While a chief technician was supposed to defer to the mech designer in charge, his lack of initiative in the face of Lisbeth's force of will was straight up cowardice. Chief Haine would never let Lisbeth go so far into developing redundant spare parts that served no purpose but to stroke O'Callahan's sense of delusional self-worth.

Though the chief needed a good kick in the butt, it was his mech designer who bore the brunt of the blame for their department's dysfunction.

The bright and peppy appearance of Lisbeth Eta-Denmerksen betrayed her unbearably happy mood at welcoming the arrival of a new expert pilot.

Ever since O'Callahan sealed himself back into semi-perpetual sleep, the specialist Apprentice became half an orphan of sorts. Would she still be useful if the vaunted Parallax Star could no longer call upon an expert pilot to ride it into battle?

Now that a new expert pilot was about to arrive to replace O'Callahan's role, Lisbeth regained all of her drive. Not only would she be able to excuse her department's extravagant budget as Venerable Xie was rumored to be

capable of piloting lancer mechs, but she would also have the privilege of caring for yet another expensive expert mech!

She couldn't wait to grope her hands all over this new landbound rifleman mech!

Perhaps the only presence that declined to attend this greeting party was Acolyte Villis! The uninvited guest assigned to tail Ves had bewilderingly made herself scarce at this moment.

He knew that she was still holing up somewhere aboard the Gorgon's Gaze. Ves explicitly confirmed her presence on the shuttle bringing Ketis and him to this ship.

Therefore, her abrupt absence said a lot about the method used to obscure the worshippers of Haatumak from detection.

Evidently, the enhanced senses of an expert pilot posed a considerable risk to them despite being able to fool everyone else!

Ves took a mental note of this observation. If nothing else, he knew he could perform some tasks without being snooped by the creepy old invisible lady as long as he stood next to the expert pilot.

He hoped that Venerable Xie wouldn't be as stuck up and inaccessible as Venerable O'Callahan.

That reminded him that he should take care of some other business while he was here.

"Miss Eta-Denmersken."

"Yes, Mr. Larkinson?" She responded with a smile.

"Our task force is currently cut off from civilization and safe harbor alike. Now that we are nearing the supposed location of the Starlight Megalodon, it is even more important to conserve our current resources. Now that we are

phasing out our dependence on Venerable O'Callahan and phasing a brand-new expert pilot, it is time to implement some necessary reforms to your department."

The smile on Lisbeth's face grew a little stiff, as if she already possessed an inkling of what might come. "Come again, sir?"

Ves turned to match Lisbeth's sunny smile with a shark-like grin of his own. "Whatever demands Venerable O'Callahan may have imposed upon your department, that has ended the moment he dragged his exhausted body back into his long-term resting place. The extravagances that your department currently enjoys ends now."

Perhaps Lisbeth would have kicked up a fuss if Venerable O'Callahan was still around to back her up, but he could no longer do so. Maybe the woman intended to win over Venerable Xie quickly in order to use him to fend off Ves, but that was why he chose to rebuke Lisbeth now instead of later.

This window of opportunity where she lacked a powerful backer was the best time to put her into place!

"What changes do you wish to implement?" She shakily asked, though she still managed to maintain her smile.

"I'm cutting your budget and allocation of resources by fifty percent, effective immediately." He brutally announced. He might as well chop her face with an axe seeing how shocked she responded to his words. "I originally wanted to cut your budget by seventy-five percent, but then I remembered that your department will be responsible for servicing the Pale Dancer as well."

"Mr. Larkinson!" She cried! "You can't do that! Cutting our budget in half will ruin our precious expert mechs! You're asking us to maintain twice as many expert mechs with just half of our old share of funds and resources!"

Effectively, you're telling us to make due with a fourth of the budget for each expert mech! That's impossible!"

### Chapter 723 Housecleaning

"Impossible, you say?" Ves replied calmly. He turned his armored form fully to the Apprentice Mech Designer, who currently wore a lighter and smaller hazard suit. She looked very small right now. "Impossible? I used to keep hundreds of mechs with a budget the size of a nutrient pack! A mech is not supposed to be an endless abyss which gobbles up container loads of resources with nothing to show for the extravagant expenditure!"

"B-B-But Mr. Larkinson! With only a fourth of the budget left to maintain the Parallax Star, it's impossible for us to retain the expert mech at its full operational capacity!"

Ves stepped closer to Lisbeth, prompting her to almost draw back. "Don't spin a tale of nonsense to me. I know exactly what is going on under your leadership! The excessive spending and the pointless fabrication of spare parts that have never once been used will end immediately! In fact, I'm ordering those extra arms, legs and backpack modules to be transferred to the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan for recycling. At least that way the base materials can be put to better use."

"This can't be allowed to happen!" Lisbeth shrieked, causing others to turn their attention to her. Her perpetual smile grew more demented and fragile by the second. "My apologies, sir, but our Venerables deserve better! How can they be expected to fight on our behalf if their mechs are rotten and fragile as a bundle of sticks? You must reverse your decision immediately, or I will tell Venerable Xie about your tyrannical act of cruelty!"

"You can bleat all you want, you wasteful cow, but as long as I'm holding my posting, I'll be the one to dictate your budget. If you don't agree, you can take it up with Major Verle, but I think he won't be amused at your demands."

Lisbeth knew she couldn't make a good case in front of Major Verle, especially as Ves had already mentioned that the Vandals were far from a condition to sustain an excessive budget, yet she simply couldn't adjust her mentality!

She used to be one of the most valued mech designers among the Vandals due to her valuable relationship with Venerable O'Callahan. Although the expert pilot rarely roused himself from sleep even before his last battle, the supremely skilled mech pilot always backed her up in her disputes against other mech designers.

To be robbed of his patronage and left unshielded against the storms battering her unprotected self caused her mind to become stuck in a loop. She couldn't process this sudden deprivation of resources!

"YOU CAN'T! YOU CAN'T STRIP US OF RESOURCES! RECANT YOUR WORDS! IT'S NOT TOO LATE!"

Whatever Ves expected from the obsessive Apprentice Mech Designer, he never expected her to jump at him and grab his shoulder pauldrons with her gauntlets. She attempted to shake him back and forth, but the stiffness of the armor as well as his superior strength prevented her from jerking him around.

Though Ves could have shook her off with ease, he decided that Lisbeth required a firmer adjustment. He wanted to hit her with a lesson on authority that she wouldn't forget. Punching in her face might feel good to him, but that would only breed unnecessary resentment on her part.

"Ketis!"

"Yes, teacher?" Ketis responded as she approached with an inquisitive expression. Her hybrid alien appearance as well as her intimidating pirate armor with its tribal markings and bone accessories made it clear that she

didn't belong to the Vandals. The looming greatsword behind the Swordmaiden's back further hit home her savage upbringing.

Lisbeth whimpered as the Swordmaiden stalked closer. A sheltered mech designer like her had never been exposed to the rough side of the frontier. Her smile grew brittle until there was barely a curve left in her mouth!

"Miss Lisbeth Eta-Denmersken has been rather lax in her fitness." Ves facetiously stated. "She's been too comfortable in her little kingdom here. I think she can use some toughening up, don't you agree?"

Fortunately, Ketis caught on to his game. She enthusiastically nodded. "Uh-huh. I'm always telling you that a mech designer who can't even chop through someone's neck with a sword isn't worth a single damn. Look at her arms! Even underneath her hazard suit, I can see they're practically like wooden sticks! I'm surprised she's strong enough to lift up a multitool. I'm sure her bones will break if she picks up anything heavier."

"Well, I've got good news for you, Lisbeth." He grinned and slapped Lisbeth on her shoulder pauldron, causing her to flinch. Ves firmly held her in his grasp and pushed her forward until she almost bumped into Ketis. "Our guest designer from Lydia's Swordmaidens is a veritable warrior! You won't find a stronger female mech designer among the Vandals. As someone who trained to be a vicious pirate since her adoption by the Swordmaidens, she's uniquely suited to shore up your fitness. Ketis!"

"What's your orders, sir?" The little devil replied with a grin and a mock salute.

"Give Miss Eta-Denmersksen a taste of the famous Swordmaiden training regime. Mind you, don't blast her with the complete set of exercises you insane women go through each day. However, I expect you to leave her tired and breathless at the end of the day."

"Sure thing, Mr. Larkinson! I've got lots of experience bringing my little sisters up to shape! Is this a one-time thing or..?"

"Keep training her during our stay aboard the Gorgon's Gaze. It is best if you can compress her training session a bit. Don't take all day. While I can't show you the inner workings of our expert mechs, I still have a lot of other stuff to show you around."

"Hah! I'll look forward to it!" Ketis replied before grabbing hold of Lisbeth's arm. The poor mech designer simply couldn't resist the Swordmaiden's forceful pull. "As for you, Lisbeth, we're going to have a great time together! It's been a while since I last put a new recruit through boot camp! Where's the nearest sparring ring?"

A bubbly Ketis dragged a panicked but smiling Lisbeth out of the hangar bay. The disparity between the two's strength couldn't be made more clear.

Ves chuckled a bit at the sight, causing Chief Keys, Lieutenant Koltov and the other members of the greeting party to take a very cautious glance at him. He met their curious stares with a confident grin.

"What is it? Do you have something to say about how I've exercised my authority?"

"N-No, sir!" Chief Keys quickly shook his head.

Koltov appeared as if she wanted to get in a word, but she eventually dropped what she wanted to say.

Even if they kicked up a fuss, Ves expected no repercussions. He knew that as long as he acted confidently and without remorse, his fellow Vandals would accept his actions no matter how far they crossed the line.

In any case, Miss Lisbeth fell under his supervision in the first place, so he had the authority to do as he pleased.

If there was one lesson he learned from the Vandals, it was that they didn't care about the means, only the result. They should applaud his attempt to curtail the overblown budget of Lisbeth's department!

In truth, Ves had ulterior motives when he sent Lisbeth off with Ketis. He wanted the Apprentice Mech Designer to be absent at the beginning stages of Venerable Xie's integration into the Flagrant Vandals.

If Venerable Xie granted Miss Lisbeth the backing she desperately craved, she could easily reverse the budget cuts. Ves couldn't allow such a travesty to happen, so he needed to set the situation up so that Ves became the principal mech designer in the expert pilot's eyes.

When Miss Lisbeth showed up ragged and tired from her brutal training session, she'd immediately make for a sorry sight that would burn into Venerable Xie's memory for the rest of his stay with the Vandals.

"A transport is approaching!" Lieutenant Koltov warned.

A moment later, a transport came into view on the other side of the open hangar bay hatch. The vessel's size prevented it from flying through the hatch like a transport.

It therefore came to a halt and spun around until its stern faced the hangar bay. Then its pilot slowly brought it closer until the stern almost touched the outer hull of the Gorgon's Gaze.

The energy screen separating the interior of the hangar bay from the vacuum of space rippled a bit as a walkway extended from the rear hatch of the transport ship. A mech stepped out of the transport and slowly traversed the fragile-looking walkway in a confident gait. The white mech slowly passed through the energy screen and touched down upon the flight deck.

"The Pale Dancer. It's so beautiful!"

Ves took in the aura emanating from the expert mech. Seeing it up close and in the flesh enabled him to take in the mech's spiritual qualities at their full strength.

Ves confirmed the makeup of its X-Factor. It was weak, very weak, but definitely present in some capacity. Ultimately, its X-Factor didn't matter all that much compared to its material performance parameters.

Swift. Agile. Accurate. Lethal. Those four words encompassed the qualities included in its vision. The Pale Dancer embodied many of the same concepts of his Crystal Lord design, and he definitely found several similarities that reminded him of his second original design.

Yet the Pale Dancer diverged a lot from his own design as well.

The Crystal Lord specialized heavily in the use of laser rifles, to the point of incorporating alien tech that enabled it to shoot crystals from its chest. While it could still wield other weapons in a pinch, its relatively light and fragile arms were never meant to compensate for the shock and recoil of a kinetic or ballistic rifle, even if they featured dampeners.

The Pale Dancer on the other hand featured thicker arms that could withstand the full force of its fast-firing kinetic rifle. The Senior retained by the Royal House of Talk designed the Pale Dancer to compliment Venerable Xie's excellent marksmanship and customized the entire mech to maximize its accuracy and consistency.

It was a masterpiece in its own right, and in his humble opinion beat the Parallax Star in overall design quality.

Then, the cockpit opened, and a mech pilot jumped out. The figure floated in the air in defiance of the artificial gravity active in the hangar bay. After a second of floating freely above everyone's heads, the mech pilot smoothly commanded his enhanced piloting suit to land before the greeting party.

The helmet retracted with a silent command, revealing a narrow, well-defined face which bore a quiet intensity that made the people around him feel.. safe for a lack of a better word.

With a tall, lean and fit body, Venerable Xie presented the epitome of a man who trained his entire life to perform his role as a guard, both in and out of the cockpit. An ornate pistol and knife hung from his belt, but Ves bet the man hid all kinds of backup weapons in his armored piloting suit.

"Karol Xie, former chief protection officer of Prince Hixt-Klaaster of the Royal House of Talk." The expert pilot saluted to the Vandals. "Reporting for duty."

The Vandals hadn't expected this kind of deference from an expert pilot. They usually possessed a lot more sense of self-importance. Though Venerable O'Callahan behaved a lot more conceited than his peers, it was undeniable that they assumed many rights.

The Fourth Prince evidently shaped his personality in an extremely servile manner for an expert pilot! Why else would an expert pilot still be loyal to a loser of a royal who lost badly when he struggled for control of his Royal House?

Lieutenant Koltov's eyes shone. This was the best opportunity to convert this brainwashed expert pilot into a lapdog of the Vandals!

"Welcome to the Flagrant Vandals, Venerable Xie." She returned the salute.

"While it is regretful that a chapter of your life is at an end, we will endeavor to make your transition into your new life as comfortable as possible. No longer will you serve a single prince. Now, you fight for an entire state!"

Just at that time, the recently-cleared hangar bay hatch rippled again as a shuttle hastily dipped through the energy screen. The shuttle dove towards the flight deck with way too much forward momentum, and only through a hard brake did it barely manage to stall the crash into an extremely rough

landing! The impact of the shuttle's landing thudded hard enough to destabilize everyone's footing!

The shuttle's hatch slid open even before the craft finished its shutdown procedure. A familiar mech officer in a piloting suit hopped out the hatch and instantly zeroed in on their new expert pilot.

"Venerable Xie! There you are! I hope I haven't arrived too late! Captain Rosa Orfan, at your service! I've been assigned to assist you in your adjustment to your new home!"

### Chapter 724 The New Guy

Ves had to hand it to Major Verle. Who better than to convert a new expert pilot than the exuberant Captain Orfan? The landbound mech officer possessed an ego the size of a battleship and possessed a force of will equivalent to elite pilots.

From what Ves had observed of her personality, Captain Orfan already acted like an expert pilot without having the skills to back it up.

Not that she ever took note of her deficiencies. She always pushed on and lived in the present. Despite her rather lackluster foresight, she was an adequate administrator and one of the best combat adepts among the Vandals.

As Captain Orfan grabbed hold of Venerable Xie and led the bewildered expert pilot out of the hangar bay, the rest of the greeting party was left in the dust.

"Okay." Lieutenant Koltov sighed and turned to Ves. "The Pale Dancer is in your care. Please carry out a thorough inspection and treat it appropriately. We will likely be depending on this machine when we make landfall at our destination."

Ves silently nodded, clear of his responsibilities.

Everyone split up to perform their other duties. Ves himself nodded to Chief Keys, who ordered his mech technicians to come and stow away the Pale Dancer.

He continued to admire the majestically white mech as it slowly slid into its new berth next to the Parallax Star. To make some room, Ves ordered the crates of spare parts to be dumped elsewhere.

It didn't matter because Ves already scheduled for the redundant parts to be taken to the logistics ships for immediate recycling. The sooner those pieces of junk got broken down, the faster Miss Lisbeth got over the fact that she wasted so much resources and time into producing a lot of useless modular components.

"The entire concept of a semi-modular expert mech is flawed. Too many of our engagements are thrust upon us without the time to switch out the wrong parts for the right parts. It just takes too much time to attach the modular limbs to the mech."

More egregiously, Miss Lisbeth actually concocted this scheme on her own, irrespective of Professor Velten's original vision for her custom-designed lancer mech. The Senior Mech Designer in charge of every design of the Vandals designed a base model along with more than a dozen different variants, each of them suitable to a particular budget and circumstance.

Miss Lisbeth looked at the variants and basically butchered them before picking out the best parts before spending an extravagant amount of resources to fabricate them separately.

Ves understood her logic, but the concept simply failed in practice because the Parallax Star had never truly been designed with a modular makeup in mind.

"It truly takes a lot of courage and self-delusion to think you can improve upon a Senior Mech Designer's vision."

He suspected that Miss Lisbeth's ability to work with highly complex expert mechs came from a careless encounter with knowledge beyond her means to understand. An excess of mental contamination must have messed up her mind to the point where she forcibly expressed the design principles of what she inadvertently absorbed in the past.

"I wouldn't be surprised if she used to work with a modular mech."

In any case, Ketis was currently running the delusional mech designer ragged in the gym compartment, so Ves was able to take charge of her department in her absence. He decided to ruthlessly take advantage of that fact and implement some long-overdue reforms to her flawed regime.

"Chief Keys!"

"Yes, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Once the Pale Dancer is secured, prepare the Parallax Star for partial disassembly."

"Sir?"

"Its design needs a few tweaks. Right now, it is way too big of a machine for Venerable Xie. Not only will he be unable to make full use of the Parallax Star's capabilities, but the burden of piloting it will actively slow him down. We've got to dial back some of its power and implement some limiters to scale back its prodigious power. Professor Velten already prepared a variant that does this as a contingency."

"B-But what about Venerable O'Callahan, sir? Theoretically, he is still able to wake from his artificial coma and deploy into battle one last time."

"The Venerable's days of soaring into space and wrecking mechs with his magnificent lance charges are over." Ves ruthlessly stomped the man's hopes. "Rather than keep this powerful reserved for an expert pilot who can collapse in his cockpit at any second, I'd rather take my chances with our new expert pilot who has a track record for reliability."

The callous way Ves referred to Venerable O'Callahan shocked Chief Keys and every mech technician in the vicinity into a numb silence. They never stopped believing in the demigod they worshipped and attended to for years! Years of dedicated service had indoctrinated these Vandal servicemen into full-blown worshippers of a conceited demigod!

The reaction of the mech technicians only spurred Ves on. "What are you looking at? Stop caring about that deadbeat of an expert! They may be called demigods, but they are as mortal and flawed as you and me! Face it, he's already at the edge of death! While it is admirable to appreciate his service to the Vandals, praying to an absent hero won't save us from the dangers that we will certainly encounter at the end of this journey. We have a new hero now!"

It took a metaphorical kick in the butt to get the stunned mech technicians to work. Even then, their productivity dipped way below what Ves found acceptable, so he had to admonish a few absent-minded mech technicians to get back to work.

Once he became satisfied at their apparent diligence, Ves found a nearby terminal and loaded in the design schematics of the Parallax Star. A lot of it the more intricate parts required special permission from Professor Velten to access.

Ves used to think the professor classified these portions in order to prevent their weaknesses from falling into the hands of enemies, but now he understood it was for their own protection. Besides someone like Miss Lisbeth

and Chief Keys, anyone else would either understand nothing at all or be driven to madness.

"Well, it's not like Miss Lisbeth is too far-off from that point."

She would probably hate what he intended to do to the Parallax Star. That was why he waited until she was gone before he began to initiate the transformation. As the mech technicians performed the initial tweaks under his direction, Ves continued to pour over the modified design. Though he made a lot of headway into transforming it into a more restrained machine, he hadn't actually presented this mech to their new expert pilot yet.

"According to his record, he's supposed to be proficient in lancer mechs as well, but piloting a superpowered version of this mech type is a big jump."

Right now, the Flagrant Vandals mostly faced threats from space. The importance of securing their fleet remained a top priority before they arrived at the suspected crash site of the Starlight Megalodon.

Therefore, Ves only instructed the mech technicians to perform the shallowest adjustments. Once he became satisfied that they wouldn't screw things up, he turned around and left the hangar bay in search of their new expert pilot.

Lieutenant Koltov had already returned to her regular duties, so Ves had to ask a few ratings where he could find the expert.

"Last I heard, Captain Orfan organized a small welcoming party at the ship's bar!"

Ves almost had to palm his face when he heard that. Of course she would attempt to ply the expert pilot with booze.

Situated in the lower decks, the ship's bar was the local watering hole for Vandals with too much credits to spend and not enough places to spend it upon. Lately, more and more Vandals frequented the bars and lounges of

their ships in order to distract themselves from the growing dread of traveling further and further away from the light of civilization.

Right now, a large congregation of off-duty Vandals gathered at the far side of the compartment. A synthetic, upbeat tune played in the background while the men and women all downed a glass of the local swill distilled out of nutrient packs.

Usually, every ship formulated a unique blend of alcohol from an eclectic combination of nutrient packs. Combining different flavors, ingredients, production dates and ages through a different homebrew distillation process cobbled together by mech technicians and engineers in their spare time resulted in wildly different varieties.

A popular saying in the galaxy was that humanity invented more flavors of alcoholic drinks than their total population.

Ves grabbed a glass of the drink and sniffed at it. When he took a sip, he found it to be dark and rich, though he wasn't a fan of the clingy layer of film that lingered in his mouth.

He navigated through the press of people and didn't hesitate to push people around to reach the center of everyone's attention. Captain Orfan already jostled about with a glass in one hand and Venerable Xie's shoulder with her other hand. The only detail that ruined the festive atmosphere was that everyone still wore their piloting suits and hazard suits.

Even though the Fire Treaders already pulled back and the sandmen showed no sign of moving in to attack, the Flagrant Swordmaidens remained at risk while they turned around and flew back to the outer portion of the star system.

However, suits aside, the Vandals tried their best to make Venerable Xie feel at home among the Vandals, though the man only barely sipped his drink until now.

"Ves! What are you doing here?!" Captain Orfan boorishly called when she saw his approach. "Aren't you supposed to play with your big toys?"

"I'm here for business, captain. I need to borrow our good expert pilot for a few minutes to get his input on the modifications that are in the works. Can I take him somewhere quiet? I'll return him to you as soon as possible."

"Sure thing! A mech is a mech pilot's lifeline!"

Once Ves brought Venerable Xie to a private booth of some sorts that came with a sound isolation screen, he activated his comm and projected the designs of the Pale Dancer and the Parallax Star.

"Mr.. Ves, is it? What is it you require of me?" The soft-spoken expert asked cautiously.

"You can call me Ves or Mr. Larkinson. Your choice, sir. I'm the temporary head designer of our task force. I called you aside so I can consult you on the changes I want to make to your mechs."

"Aren't you rather young for a head designer?"

"The guy who was supposed to take up this post is regretfully missing, sir." And very likely dead or imprisoned by now, but Ves didn't want to rehash those dark thoughts. "Anyway, I won't take up too much of your time. Right now, the Flagrant Vandals intend to make full use of your versatility by adapting the spaceborn lancer mech originally designed for our last expert pilot for your use. Here is the design of the Parallax Star as well as a summary of its specs after it has gone through an adjustment. Is there anything not to your liking?"

"While I am capable of piloting a lancer mech, I prefer to pilot a ranged mech.."

"I'm sorry. We don't have the time nor resources to design and fabricate a spaceborn rifleman mech tailored to your ability. You will probably have the opportunity to request one from my superior once our task force returns to civilized space and merges back into the main fleet. For now, we need to make do with our existing resources."

Venerable Xie did not look very pleased at the fact that the Vandals expected him to pilot what was essentially used goods. However, he was also a good soldier, so he barely barked an objection.

Both of them held a brief but fruitful discussion concerning the Parallax Star. The expert pilot requested a lot of minor tweaks and changes that bent the Parallax Star closer to his personal style of combat.

Though Ves couldn't fulfill every item in Venerable Xie's wishlist, he promised to do his best to implement the main changes the expert pilot insisted on having. If he was being pushed to pilot a spaceborn lancer mech, then it better reflect his own style rather than someone else's!

#### **Chapter 725 The New Star**

The arrival of the Rovista Splendor in the bosom of the Flagrant Swordmaidens marked the formal end to Prince Hixt-Klaaster's ambitions to start up an independent colony in the Faris Star Region.

The haunted and traumatized prince had to say goodbye to his final mobile asset as his flagship burnt herself out trying to sprint to rescue.

Transports and shuttles brought men and supplies out of the doomed combat carrier. Even if the Flagrant Swordmaidens weren't able to salvage the valuable ship herself, the Rovista Splendor still carried a bountiful amount of cargo.

The Fourth Prince and his surviving retainers all relocated to the various vessels of their rescuers. The Vandals and the Swordmaidens deliberately

split up the prince's crew to minimize any chance of staging a revolt or engage in some other scheme.

Due to the need to secure Venerable Karol Xie's loyalty, it was in the best interest for the Flagrant Swordmaidens to uphold their end of the bargain. Therefore, they did their best to treat the displaced survivors of the Shining Stars Colonization Fleet as guests instead of prisoners or slaves.

Nonetheless, hosting these refugees from the Dark Plasma Star Sector while on a mission to find the Starlight Megalodon entailed too many risks and inconveniences. Major Verle and Commander Lydia had no stomach of keeping these bedraggled refugees on their ships any longer than they had to. The sooner they got rid of the colonists, the sooner they could get back to their main mission.

Fortunately, Commander Lydia knew of an obscure space station situated roughly along their current route. If their combined fleet made a major detour, they could reach the space station and drop off the survivors, relieving them of their burden.

The only problem was that the Dragon Alliance administered the space station. While the Swordmaidens maintained a fairly neutral relationship with the largest pirate alliance in the Faris Star System, they never felt very safe when they entered their territory.

The Dragons of the Void who led the pirate bloc had an unfortunate habit of kidnapping and brainwashing pirates to serve as their cannon fodder.

Still, the Swordmaidens couldn't find another space station where they could dump the refugees without taking an even bigger detour.

"We are setting course to the Woolox Star System!"

With the sandmen fleet preoccupied with the debris field and the Fire Treaders meekly running away, the Flagrant Swordmaidens encountered no

obstacles when they reached the edge of the star system and transitioned back into FTL.

It would take roughly a week to reach the Woolox System. Everyone shed their hazard suits and armor suits once the fleet found refuge in FTL.

In the meantime, Ves managed to right a lot of wrongs during his stint aboard the Gorgon's Gaze.

He reprimanded the mech technicians whenever they showed off a bad habit. He reprimanded Chief Keys for allowing the mech technicians to develop those bad habits in the first place. He quietly cursed Miss Lisbeth for turning Chief Keys into the most useless chief technician he had ever met.

If not for his familiarity with the Parallax Star's design and his resilience in the face of working with an extremely advanced mech, Ves would have suggested another chief technician to take his place. For now, necessity and lack of qualified personnel kept these unproductive bunch of mech technicians in place.

"It's not a good idea to switch them out in the middle of a mission anyway." He reminded himself. "I can't rock the boat too much at this stage. I'll have to make do with band-aid solutions."

Ves vigorously cleaned up the department's act and got them to work on a normal schedule like everyone else. The days of lazing about or performing useless repetitive actions to pretend they are at work was over.

If Ves had no more work on his plate, then that was called good delegation. If his subordinates weren't working, then that was called slacking on the job!

"Only the boss deserves to slack on the job!"

After addressing the consequences of years of Lisbeth's lackluster leadership, Ves finally achieved a satisfactory pace in his attempt to convert the Parallax Star into a mech that fit Venerable Xie's style.

The Parallax Star underwent a major makeover during his brief takeover of Miss Lisbeth's department.

"It's unfortunate that lancer mechs aren't very compatible with his best strengths."

Venerable Xie generally preferred to pilot fast but agile mechs, no matter if they were of the landbound or spaceborn variety. A lancer mech excelled at accelerating to ludicrous speeds quickly in a straight line, but they weren't exactly the most agile mechs of the bunch. They performed fairly poorly compared to other melee mechs in short-ranged duels and dogfights.

Professor Velten originally designed the Parallax Star to fit Venerable O'Callahan's daring charges. Much of the resonating materials incorporated in its frame only exhibited their maximum potential when the Parallax Star built up a straight-line charge.

However, Venerable Xie stated an intention to pilot the Parallax Star as a spearman mech rather than the lancer mech. The difference between the two mech types was that the former fought like an ancient infantryman while the latter fought like a cavalryman.

Though both mechs utilized long weapons with a sharp end at the tip, the actual differences in their design were rather drastic.

Ves plainly couldn't convert the Parallax Star from one mech type to another mech type with the snap of his fingers. The best he could promise their new expert pilot was to make some accommodations.

In other words, the new state of the Parallax Star effectively resulted in a hybrid between the two mech types.

"What a sloppy outcome."

Such a change wasn't easy at all and Ves had the feeling he was wasting the Parallax Star's potential by forcing a change against its nature. However, Venerable Xie wouldn't be able to pilot the lancer mech like its previous expert pilot anyway because his resonance strength couldn't keep up with the demands of the lancer mech.

As for the Pale Dancer, Ves deferred any modifications for later. It took some time for the Flagrant Swordmaidens to reach the Starlight Megalodon, so while Ves already had a small redesign in store to strengthen it against the crushing effects of extreme gravity environments, he needed to wait until the mech technicians completed the work on the Parallax Star.

The disgruntled mech technicians already called Ves a slave driver behind his back. If Ves could get away with whipping their backs, he would have already done so.

Compared to the rest of their colleagues who maintained their high spirits while working productively, these men and women developed a superiority complex solely due to the fact that they worked on the personal fighting steeds of expert mechs.

Shaving down their egos required a considerable effort on his part. Ves knew he couldn't change the department permanently as long as Miss Lisbreth and Chief Keys remained in charge. However, he hoped his intervention here stuck around long enough to help the Vandals survive through this mission.

What happened after they completed the mission and finally returned to the Bright Republic was someone else's problem.

"I'm already on my way out anyway."

During the exhaustive efforts to reshape the expert mechs, Venerable Xie dropped by occasionally with Captain Orfan in tow. As a responsible expert pilot, he cared a lot about the mechs he would be working with in the future.

Ves knew that every expert pilot developed some kind of inner strength related to spirituality. Whenever he drew near their new expert pilot, he sensed a muted aura that radiated a warm current of protectiveness.

Anyone standing close to Venerable Xie would unconsciously feel reassured that he would have their backs. Even if no one could put their feelings into words, nobody wanted to be separated from his presence.

"How is this lancer mech shaping up?" Xie asked in his second visit for the day.

"The Parallax Star is more than halfway through its transformation, sir. We've hit a few snags at the start, but the mech technicians have just completed the hardest parts about the conversion. As you've requested, the mech pilots less like a lancer mech and more like a spearman mech. It will be able to go head-to-head against enemy duelists with a bit more proficiency."

The expert pilot took in the Parallax Star with a critical eye. Obviously, he was never really taken in by the lancer mech. "Even with the changes, it will still be a difficult mech for me to pilot. I don't pretend I can match the skill its previous owner has demonstrated. I am amazed at O'Callahan's feats whenever I watch archival footage of his deployments. I have a big pair of shoes to fill."

Nobody knew how well the expert pilot might fare in the newly adjusted Parallax Star. There was no point stuffing Venerable Xie inside a simulator pod and have him play with a virtual version of the mech. The phenomena that expert pilots were capable of summoning translated poorly into a virtual environment.

Only a live test with the actual mech in use would prove whether Ves had succeeded in his minor redesign.

It excited him. Though he should have consulted Professor Velten to inspect his redesign plan, it would have been a huge hassle considering the current communications blackout instituted among the entire combined fleet.

"If the redesign is successful, are you prepared to defend the Flagrant Vandals and our allies from the threats we're expecting to face?" Ves asked.

"Of course he is!" Captain Orfan immediately intervened. She approached the expert pilot and slapped him on the back. "He's one of us now! A genuine Vandal! I heard that Major Verle even sent out an emergency citizenship application for our man here. From what I heard, the people back home approved the application within three minutes! You're looking at a new citizen of the Bright Republic here!"

Ves blinked. "That fast? Wow, the Mech Corps must be desperate for expert pilots. Don't they usually conduct a thorough background check before they approve of any foreign elite?"

"Don't ask me why the folks back home have made it so easy. But that means that Venerable Xie here is a true Brighter now!"

The expert pilot in question chose to ask an awkward question at this moment. "Does this mean that the supposed war you Brighters are embroiled in is going worse than expected?"

That shut Captain Orfan up.

"We don't know." Ves answered after a few seconds. "We're so far away from the war that we don't know how well it's going for our side. If it's like the last wars, then the Bright Republic ought to have unleashed their counterattack against a divided, overextended and exhausted Vesian invasion front.

Whether that has already happened enough is still an open question. We'd be

able to get some clues if we can access the galactic net, but these days it's so full of spam and misinformation that you can never get the full truth out of reading the news portals."

The unspoken message lingering in the back of their minds was that the Flagrant Vandals ought to be fighting in the thick of it. Instead, a confidential mission brought them far outside the theater of war that the Vandals had difficulty recalling the last time they fought against a Vesian force.

While they stomped and intimidated several pirate outfits lately, they found little meaning and even less satisfaction out of their hollow victories.

What was the point of venturing so far out into the most desolate parts of the galaxy?

"Tell me more about the Bright Republic." Venerable Xie diplomatically steered the topic away from the war. "If it is to be my newly adopted state, I'd like to know how to fit in. It is strange for me to serve a republic. Adjusting to a society where every citizen theoretically holds the same status is strange for me to comprehend. How are you able to determine who is fit to rule and who is fit to work?"

Oh boy. Ves inwardly cringed. To someone who grew up under the yoke of aristocrats who claimed their right to rule came from their birthright, it was difficult for them to open up their minds to alternatives.

"It's a long story..."

### Chapter 726 Force of Will

Due to his lower-class upbringing along with the intense efforts of the Fourth Prince to keep him under his thumb, Venerable Xie never developed a strong sense of pride and self-worth.

By all accounts, the fact that he broke through to become an expert pilot was purely an unanticipated fluke. Though his elevation overjoyed the Fourth

Prince, the fact that he possessed such a strong and reliable bodyguard must have alarmed his fellow claimants to the throne.

Venerable Xie's advancements in the ranks of experts likely accelerated Prince Hixt-Klaaster's downfall in the Royal House of Talk.

Ves only surmised this from the scraps of information the Venerable revealed about his old employer. Neither Ves nor Captain Orfan managed to pry open his mouth about the matters of the Royal House of Talk and the Palast Kingdom.

"I do miss them, though." He sighed as the three lounged in a corner of the mech workshop where the Parallax Star underwent its final adjustments. "Talk is a proud House and one that has established a firm but just rule over the Palast Kingdom. Our state is experiencing a golden age under the rule of this House!"

The two citizens of the Bright Republic rolled their eyes. They heard similar praises from Vesian citizens who didn't know any better. Still, it wasn't as if they could say anything to the contrary. They learned that criticizing the Fourth Prince, the Royal House of Talk and the Palast Kingdom was a sure way to trigger the expert pilot.

The Vandals had to remind themselves that Venerable Xie only grudgingly left the Fourth Prince's service. If Prince Hixt-Klaaster hadn't bargained away his loyal retainer, the Flagrant Swordmaidens would have never gone through the trouble of rescuing him and his remaining men.

While Captain Orfan did a decent job at making Xie feel at home among the Vandals, his remaining attachments still held him back from committing to his new home.

In a way, Ves felt sorry for the hapless expert pilot. The man never had the opportunity to develop a firm and independent personality. His unbreakable

emotional dependence on the Fourth Prince became a huge hindrance to everyone.

Over time, the Vandals would probably encourage Xie to grow a spine. Right now, they still needed him to be as well-behaved and obedient as a puppy.

As the works on the Parallax Star started to wind down, the work on the Pale Dancer began to pick up. Since Ves placed most of his attention to supervising the conversion of the Parallax Star, he placed responsibility to ensure the Pale Dancer's adjustments went correctly to Miss Lisbeth, though with a few caveats.

She would only get to perform her duties after she survived an intensive training session conducted by Ketis. The Swordmaiden mech designer love for personal training drove Lisbeth to her wit's end. Her body almost broke down several times during the training sessions, causing Ves to chuckle.

Miss Lisbeth still managed to summon up a smile when she showed up at work in the late mornings. Wracked with muscle pains and fatigue, she listlessly performed her duties in a robotic fashion.

Her exhausted mind and body left her with very little energy to exercise her own initiative. She also made for a pathetic sight whenever she came into view of Venerable Xie. Though the expert pilot remained scrupulously respectable to everyone he met, he showed signs of discomfort whenever he came into the presence of someone with a sloppy and disheveled appearance.

To be honest, Ves felt rather disappointed by this expert pilot they obtained at a bargain price.

"You get what you paid for." He sighed when he met with Ketis after a quiet dinner. "Don't think that all expert pilots are like Venerable Xie. Most of them are aware of their rights and privileges, and don't hesitate to take advantage

of it. As far as I'm aware of, even the experts in my own extended family aren't above taking liberties when it suits them. It helps that we maintain a fairly good reputation, though. It lets us get away with even more stuff than usual."

The two enjoyed some free time together in a quiet corner at the ship's bar. He took a modest swig of the filmy brew the crew of the Gorgon's Gaze liked to drink. While he didn't claim to love the nasty aftertaste, he started to get used to it at least.

Ketis preferred to knock over the stronger stuff the resident brewmasters had cooked up in their darkest lairs. Her extensive genetic modifications had hardened her against all manner of poisons, so she needed to imbibe a lot more alcohol to get a buzz.

Ves suffered from the same problem as well actually, but he didn't drink because he wanted to get smashed.

"What's it like to grow up in a family with expert pilots in your line?" She asked. "You guys must be royalty, right?!"

"Not really. You have to understand that while the Bright Republic treats expert pilots well, they don't get elevated into nobility like they do in the Vesia Kingdom. It's part of our belief that every human is the same."

That sounded alien to a daughter of the frontier like Ketis. "I can't imagine what that's like. Also, how do you get so many expert pilots in your line? Many people who have kids are struggling to get them to inherit the right genetic aptitude for piloting mechs, but your guys are swimming in experts!"

Ves laughed at that. "It's not as exceptional as it sounds. First we're part of a family line descended from an exile of the New Rubarth Empire. From some accounts, our ancestor is quite special, though our history records of the period back then are a little spotty. While his blood has run thin, we've kept our genetic aptitude high through spending a considerable amount of our

earnings into funding our own private gene clinic. Through the help of tailored genetic treatments, we've been able to insure our family births a high proportion of potentates in each generation."

In fact, the old adage that only 3.5 percent of the population possessed the right aptitude to pilot mechs only applied in a global sense. Though even the best medical research had never managed to guarantee a hundred percent chance a child would be born with the right genetic aptitude, achieving a success rate of say twenty to thirty percent was still doable for any family descended from a genetically gifted individual.

"That only explains how you have a lot of mech pilots in your family." She frowned before taking another swig at her drink. She burped immediately after. "How come expert pilots pop up in your family in each generation? That's way too much!"

"We don't exactly understand the exact mechanics on how to create an expert pilot, but it helps if your family has a large amount of mech pilots entering the service every generation." He patiently explained. "Throwing sheer numbers at the problem increases the chance that we win the lottery at least once. Conflict is also the number one driver for an expert pilot to emerge, as danger and the threat of death draws out the full potential of any mech pilot."

Ketis frowned even more. "If that's the case, mech pilots would be throwing themselves into battle all the time. Hell, all of those crazy lunatics from the Ravienne Alliance would be filled with expert pilots by now if that's the case!"

"The Larkinsons believe that part of what makes a mech pilot an expert pilot is a strong will. Every expert pilot that I've met has a strong belief in a particular ideal or belief. None of them are weak-willed in any way and if you challenge them on their ethos, you're going to end up on the losing end."

Ves actually saw a lot of parallels in the development of mech pilots to the advancement of mech designers. He speculated that both of these professions hinged on the stimulation of their inborn spirituality.

In fact, when he extrapolated the implications of this hypothesis, he made another guess that each different human different in the strength of their inherent spirituality.

Just like each mech pilot could be rated by their genetic aptitude, each human in turn possessed a different magnitude of spirituality. Both of these traits might even be passed on through genetics, though probability and providence played a major role in their expression.

A potential explanation for the reason why the Larkinsons nurtured so many expert pilots was that their founding ancestor was supremely gifted in both genetic aptitude and inborn spirituality.

This gave every Larkinson who inherited the right genes and was subjected to the exclusive Larkinson pre-birth genetic tweaking a good starting point to break through the critical barrier that stopped many advanced pilots from becoming an expert pilot!

However, many families who were a lot more prosperous than the Larkinsons poured a lot of money and resources into acquiring the right genetics. Despite their extravagant investment in this area, their offspring often proved to be lackluster to the point of nurturing not a single expert pilot!

Ves believed that one of the causes of their high-profile failures was because they didn't take inborn spirituality into account. The other major cause was that they pampered their offspring too much! He had never encountered an expert pilot who used to be a spoiled brat!

Each and every one of them possessed a firm will and tempered themselves with unwavering discipline.

Still, he also knew that exceptions existed, particularly in the more prosperous parts of the galaxy. Strange, voodoo treatments and obscure methods occasionally managed to elevate a spoiled brat into the enviable ranks of expert pilots.

This just emphasized the fact that nobody truly knew how expert pilots came to be. Not even Ves claimed to hold a high degree of trust in his own speculations.

"You know, all of that talk about having a strong will reminds me of our Swordmaiden training." Ketis remarked. "Commander Lydia is really adamant about that. Every sister that we recruit has to go through our training regime. Heh, just look at how tired that Lisbeth woman is after I've forced her through a portion of our regular training routine."

"Disciplining her subordinates through training is a tried-and-true method for every outfit. I think that's one of the reasons why the Flagrant Vandals is comfortable with cooperating with your Swordmaidens despite the fact that you are pirates. Aside from your strange quirks, you are always in control of yourselves. At least you're a far cry from the undisciplined masses I've encountered at Mancroft."

"Yeah, but if your theory or whatever is right, why hasn't any of our sisters broken through expert pilot yet? We get into fights all the time! Sure, we don't fight as many pitched battles, but we are constantly risking our lives out here!"

"I can't explain that, Ketis. Your guess is as good as mine, which is as good as any random person off the street. I have a few guesses, actually, but even if you believe them, there is little what you Swordmaidens can actually do. In the end, it all comes down to chance. From the riches scions from the galactic center, to the poorest beggar from the frontier, I believe that an exceptional mech pilot can come from every corner of the galaxy. It's just that people from

less developed areas don't have a high opportunity to come into touch with mechs in the first place, which is why the frontier seems so barren of experts."

"Well, the frontier won't stay poor forever." She boasted as she poured the rest of her drink down her throat. "Ahhh! I've heard rumors that the CFA is considering opening up the Faris Star Region for colonization within our lifetimes. When that happens, everyone's fortunes will change."

Ves doubted whether the indigenous and the pirate riffraff would actually benefit from such an expansion event. According to historical trends, outside colonists always manage to displace whoever settled the star systems beforehand.

Meanwhile, most pirates got wiped out.

#### Chapter 727 Killswitch

The Flagrant Swordmaidens almost reached the Woolox System after more than a week of travel. They encountered a couple of hitches along the way, but they weren't delayed for very long.

During one of their stop-overs, Venerable Xie carefully took the newly modified Parallax Star on a test run.

The initial deployment went a little rougher than everybody liked. Ves overlooked a couple of compatibility issues that he immediately patched up. When Xie deployed yet again, he reported that he felt a lot more comfortable in piloting the machine, though it still felt like riding a bucking horse according to the expert pilot.

"Riding a bucking horse is better than walking on foot, sir." Ves reported in a routine status update to Major Verle. "There's very little I can do to improve the compatibility between the Parallax Star and Venerable Xie. You can't just shift any customized expert mech designed to be piloted by a specific expert

pilot to a completely different person. There is some.. friction between man and machine."

"Will it help if Professor Velten pitches in on the design?"

Ves shook his head over the comm. "Yes, but not as much as you are hoping, sir. Even the professor can't increase the compatibility between the Parallax Star and Venerable Xie if she isn't able to meet the expert pilot in the flesh. While it's possible for her to get to know Xie better through remote communication, it's not as good as just meeting the man up close. I've interacted personally with the Venerable, so my work is not that much off from what she doubtlessly wishes to implement as well."

While that was true, Ves also didn't want to stay aboard the Gorgon's Gaze any longer. He still had a side project with his name on it waiting back on the Shield of Hispania!

If Professor Velten pitched in with her own tweaks, then he'd certainly be stuck here a couple of weeks longer!

"Very well." Fortunately, Major Verle bought his excuse. "What are your estimates of its fighting strength in Venerable Xie's hands?"

"Sir, I'm sure your mech officers have made their own estimates based on his initial practice runs, but from a mech designer's perspective I don't think his resonance strength is up to the task of expressing more than thirty percent of its maximum strength. A lot of the expenses put into the fabrication of the Parallax Star is to enhance the effects of its energy shield and its piercing effects. It doesn't help that Venerable Xie doesn't favor utilizing charges in his fighting style. He can do it, but he's not very adept at pulling out the expert mech's strength."

"I am aware of this deficiency. It is a simple fact of life that we have to work with what we have at our disposal. The only role reserved for Venerable Xie in

our mech regiment is to hinder the advance of enemy expert pilots. So long as he can be employed against ferocious tigers hell-bent on slaughtering our rank-and-file, we can save the lives of hundreds of fellow Vandal mech pilots."

Ves didn't mention that the Parallax Star made for a relatively poor guardian in its new state and its new mech pilot. The mech lost much of the magic that made it competitive among expert mechs, and a weaker expert pilot only exacerbated the drop in combat strength.

After finishing his report, Ves received one more surprise visitor the day before his return to the Shield of Hispania. Lieutenant Koltov caught him just after he exited the toilet.

"Mr. Larkinson! A moment of your time please."

"Certainly, lieutenant."

The two found an out-of-the-way compartment to conduct their private talk. Of course, it wouldn't be very private considering the Gorgon's Gaze monitoring system recorded everything while an uninvited guest constantly followed behind Ves whenever he wasn't in the same compartment as Venerable Xie.

Ves did take advantage of the caution shown by Acolyte Villis by implementing some measures out of her sight. He couldn't do much on his own, but he hoped the precautions he prepared out of the cultist's sight could save the Flagrant Swordmaidens from a potential disaster.

He still wondered what Koltov wanted from him. "Why have you called me out here?"

"It's about Venerable Karol Xie. Some of us are harboring some concerns about his.. Dedication, shall we say. Haven't you wondered why Xie is overly deferential and cooperative to a fault with us?"

"Hm. I thought that was part of his personality?" Ves threw out the obvious. "The Fourth Prince kept him on a leash since he was a puppy. Now that he has grown up to become a fierce guard dog, he still acts like he wants some treats to his master."

"We've thought of that, but there is just something that doesn't quite fit. The whole circumstance surrounding the foundering of the Shining Stars Colonization Fleet is rather dubious in the first place. Although we've verified that Prince Hixt-Klaaster is a genuine royal from the Palast Kingdom of the Dark Plasma Star Sector, it requires a successive chain of poor decisions to lead his colonization fleet to ruin in the Ermeghast Star System."

She basically suggested that there might have been a possibility that the Fourth Prince deliberately led his colonization fleet to their doom. Yet Ves found this entire possibility ridiculous.

"There's no apparent motive for this. What does the Fourth Prince and Venerable Xie gain from all of this? Sure, they get to ride on our fleet for a while, but we're almost about to drop off the prince at the Woolox System. In addition, there's no way the Fourth Prince can anticipate our arrival in the Ermaghasst System at that date. This is way too convoluted. Occam's Razor suggests that the Fourth Prince is simply a poor decision maker and that all of his mistakes can be attributed to his lack of judgement."

The lieutenant held up a hand to placate Ves. "We don't necessarily disagree, but we must always remain vigilant against the alternatives. Right now, we are more than eager to get rid of the Fourth Prince and his surviving retainers. Yet even if we have made some arrangements so that the prince and his loyalists are taken care of, we still don't know if Venerable Xie has made some other arrangements. We believe there is a small but potentially devastating chance that Xie is already spoken for. In the worst-case scenario, he has already

pledged his loyalty to one of our competitors in our hunt for the Starlight Megalodon."

He could see how that could turn very bad for the Flagrant Vandals. If Venerable Xie was some kind of sleeper agent, he could very well turn the might of the Parallax Star or the Pale Dancer against their own side! The potential damage this expert pilot could inflict when the Vandals least expected it could potentially demolish half of their effective strength!

"Okay.. that sounds like a very scary prospect." He said. "But what do you want me to do about it? Are you suggesting that I plant a kill switch or some kind of remote control on his expert mechs?"

"Is it possible?"

"It is, but just because I can do so doesn't mean it's a good idea!" He immediately replied. "What happens if the wrong person obtains the codes to initiate a remote shutdown? What if a talented hacker on the other side manages to intrude the remote connection responsible for receiving the command to activate the killswitch? It's going to be a straight-up catastrophe in that case! The chance of misuse is much higher than the chance of us ever needing to resort to this method!"

Ves particularly feared one of the uninvited guests getting their hands on the command codes. Even if Ves programmed and implemented the killswitch while Venerable Xie was in the vicinity of his mechs, the Acolytes following the other important officers would easily be able to copy the exact protocols that determined whether the expert mechs lived or died.

"I'm sorry you feel that way. Perhaps we are barking up the wrong tree here."

"Lieutenant, look, don't take this the wrong way, but even if you ask someone like Lisbeth to implement a killswitch, I can guarantee you something will go wrong when we can least afford to. If you have any misgivings about

Venerable Xie, you can resort to other means to insure his loyalty. But don't mess with the mechs. Machines are a lot more susceptible to outside manipulation than humans if you open up a backdoor. Don't do it. Tell whoever is in charge of this investigation not to introduce such a vulnerability."

"I'll pass on your words, Mr. Larkinson. That is the extent of what I can promise. For what it's worth, I believe you."

Once he saw Koltov walk away, Ves furrowed his brows and thought about what he heard. While he didn't find it unusual for the Vandals to suspect Venerable Xie's loyalties, did they really have to go so far?

In the end, it all came down to the fact that Karol Xie was a foreigner. He hailed from the Palast Kingdom and grew up in a completely different culture. If Xie had been a Brighter, then this conversation would have never happened, because the Vandals had no cause to doubt the loyalty of a fellow native expert pilot.

"A foreign expert pilot that falls in your lap for some reason is just too suspicious to take for granted. They're not like cabbages that you can pick up from the roadside."

After a quiet day where Ves wrapped up the many changes he introduced in Lisbeth's department, the Flagrant Swordmaidens transitioned out of FTL in the edge of the Woolox System.

Every Vandal and Swordmaiden in the allied fleet adorned themselves in hazard suits, piloting suits or combat armor. This time, they wouldn't be emerging in some random unclaimed star system.

This time, they entered a distant outpost of the dreaded Dragon Alliance.

The Gorgon's Gaze lacked a command center where a commanding officer could take charge of the entire fleet. Since Ves didn't receive an invitation to sit in on the bridge or the combat information center, Ves and Ketis decided to

hole up in the hangar bay where the Parallax Star had been prepared to sortie in the event of an emergency.

Nobody knew what kind of reception they would get upon arrival in the Woolox Star System. While the Swordmaidens conducted occasional trades with the Dragon Alliance, their principal overlords clashed several times against the Bright Republic in earlier incidents.

Ves himself suffered several times at the hand of the Dragons of the Void. The premier pirate organization even dared to trespass the borders of the Bright Republic and contend for the spoils of the Glowing Planet more than a year ago!

Fortunately, the Flagrant Swordmaidens emerged far away from any pirate ships in the vicinity. After a frantic half hour of intensive scanning and patrols, they became reassured they hadn't encountered any threats.

Nobody was allowed to shed their suits, though. Considering who called the shots around here, the Flagrant Swordmaidens needed to be ready to deploy for combat at any time. Even the Swordmaidens never put down their guard when entering Dragon Alliance territory.

While the fleet cautiously approached the only space station in the Woolox System, Ves and Ketis quietly returned to the Shield of Hispania via shuttle ride.

During the shuttle ride, Ves studied the system plot. The Woolox System didn't appear to be a highly frequented star system. Only a handful of small and bedraggled outfits docked at or close to the space station at this time.

"The Woolox System is kind of like the last outpost before you enter into the true frontier." Ketis explained when he commented on the lack of pirates in this star system. "While the chances of digging up an undiscovered treasure is

higher when you go past this line, few treasure hunters ever manage to return from their expeditions into the dark."

"Why the low survival rate?"

"It's because the sandmen race are really active past this line."

### Chapter 728 Prevacating Prince

The Woolox System centered around a bog-standard red dwarf ubiquitous in the galaxy. Due to its low mass and energy output, the sandmen tended to overlook it, which the Dragon Alliance capitalized upon by setting up a small space station in orbit of the third planet from the sun.

However, just because the red dwarf was a puny star in galactic terms didn't mean it packed a punch.

Though rare, Woolox I, the closest planet orbiting the sun, consisted of a Hot Jupiter that orbited around the sun like a frenetic wheel. The gas giant absorbed so much heat from the sun due to its proximity that its actual gas expanded by quite a bit. This made the Hot Jupiter take on a rather puffy appearance.

If the planet wasn't so volatile and orbiting so close to the red dwarf, a harvesting operation could slowly scoop up all of that loose gas.

Woolox II and Woolox III consisted of the normal lifeless terrestrial planets with nothing unusual. Woolox II orbited a bit too close to the sun, so the Dragon Alliance plopped a space station in the orbit of the much-cooler Woolox III.

The Dragon Alliance collectively administered the outpost at the precipice of the deep frontier because no pirate gang was stupid enough to assume sole responsibility of what was called the Sandcastle.

The Sandcastle received its name due to the star system's proximity to the core occupied space of the sandmen race. Many star systems beyond the Woolox System contained massive concentrations of sandmen.

Gathered into huge amalgamations of sentient sand on the surface of planets and moons, these massive concentrations posed an extremely deadly threat to any human that strayed close to these colonies.

The most dangerous part about these huge sandmen colonies was that they grew extremely smart when a huge number of them gathered on a single planet. Centered around a sandmen governor or mayor whose body was made out of sentient exotic material, their level of calculation and forethought sometimes resembled the thinking patterns of AIs!

Some people argue that the sandmen race was in fact a virtual race, a natural-born race of computers in other words. Equating them in the same box as organic races such as humans didn't accurately reflect their fundamental nature.

In any case, while the full might of the CFA could easily stomp the sandmen empire into the stone age, they were currently preoccupied with other matters.

That left the sandmen race as a perennial threat to the inhabitants of the Faris Star Region. Though the sandmen learned not to approach human space in larger numbers, some of their more simple-minded offshoots didn't get the message, causing a steady outpouring of weaker sandmen fleets to pour into the space nominally ruled over by the pirates.

"We pirates tend to look at the sandmen like processors and bots rolled into sand-like grains." Ketis explained to Ves. Her knowledge regarding sandmen was much more extensive than Ves, who only hear and read third-hand accounts about the silicone-based race. "They're crazily smart if they gather in large numbers, but an average fleet is as smart as one of those cleaning bots

we bumped into at the Mancroft Independent Harbor last time. They're as murderous as those bots as well."

"The sandmen fleets are capable of self-learning, though, especially when led by a sandmen leader."

"Yeah, but even then, their learning process is really slow. Mayra once told me that much of their processing power is occupied with keeping their silicate-based forms animated. They don't have much spare capacity for thought. This is also how they grew to become dependent on gathering in large groups to grow smarter. An individual sandmen intelligence is rather tiny, but gather enough of them and pool them into a single special sandmen, and you practically have an AI with access to a lot of processing power. Even then, they're still as dumb as bots, so it takes decades for a sandman leader to develop enough smarts to rival a human."

All of this meant that the Woolox System stood at the precipice of some of the most dangerous forms of sandmen in the region. Scores of intelligent sandmen leaders lurked just beyond the invisible line that bisected the Faris Star Region in two.

The Sandcastle didn't look very impressive to Ves. A fraction the size of Mancroft Station, the Dragon Alliance obviously invested the bare minimum they could get away with to establish a permanent presence in this red dwarf star system.

With only a handful of shops, a small hold filled with meager amounts of food, water, fuel and other necessities, the Sandcastle stayed afloat by selling their products at ripoff prices. There was hardly any space station closer to the deep frontier than the Sandcastle, so visitors had no choice but to pay for the wildly inflated prices if they needed something.

"This place doesn't sound friendly at all." Ves spoke. "I'm kind of worried about what will happen to the Fourth Prince and his surviving retainers after we drop them off here. What will happen to them?"

Surprisingly, Ketis knew the answer. "Ah, I already heard word that Commander Lydia has commissioned the Omen of Misfortune to come here and pick them up. It'll take a while for the Omen of Misfortune to reach the Woolox System, but they owe us for saving their bacon back at Mancroft, so they have no choice but to fulfill this small favor."

Until then, the remnants of the Shining Stars needed to hole up in this desolate outpost of a space station.

Ves did not exactly feel very confident the Fourth Prince would be able to survive in this nearly-forgotten corner of the galaxy.

"How you you insure the local pirates won't mess with them in the meantime? The Fourth Prince is without a ship, mech and his trusted expert pilot. He's practically naked now, and we're just going to throw him to the wolves?"

"That's why we're hiring the local pirates instead. We're paying the pirates some of the K-coins we've appropriated from his own flagship and use that to bribe the station administrator and commission some of the local gangs to keep an eye on the Fourth Prince."

That sounded like a pirate thing to do. The question was whether the pirates who accepted money from the Flagrant Swordmaidens would actually fulfill their end of the bargain. This far away from civilized space, no one insured that business contracts would be followed to the letter.

As the fleet finally reached the outpost some time later, the Fourth Prince evidently had a change of heart.

Gossip rang throughout the fleet.

"Prince Hixt-whatever doesn't want to be dumped at the Sandcastle!"

"Hey, if I were him, I wouldn't be going to that garage box of a space station either! Just look at it! Even an apartment complex from Haston looks better than that!"

"Venerable Xie is backing up his former prince! I heard that once the Fourth Prince kicked up a fuss, the expert pilot put his foot down! Seems like his heart is still devoted towards his old boss!"

Prince Hixt-Klaaster's hissy fit threw the plans of the Flagrant Swordmaidens in disarray. With the sensitive nature of their mission, they couldn't afford to bring a complete stranger picked up from the frontier under rather dubious circumstances.

Though the same applied to Venerable Xie, the Vandals believed in his integrity. As for the Fourth Prince...

"This guy unilaterally wants to change the agreement."

"I hear that the prince is a gullible, short-sighted fool back in his own kingdom. It's no wonder the other princes kicked him out of the Dark Plasma Star Sector."

"Now that this guy wants to stick around, he turned into a real headache for the bigwigs. They can't kick him out, but they don't want to bring him along."

"We don't have a choice. Venerable Xie is only willing to fight for us if the prince is safe. If we dump him at the Sandcastle, the local scum could stab him in the back and rob his corpse blind at any time. The guy's worries are legitimate."

After some delay, the brass came to a compromise with Prince Hixt-Klaaster. The surviving crew of the *Rovista Splendor* and his remaining retainers would be dumped at the Sandcastle. The *Omen of Misfortune* would still come and

pick them up and bring them to a safer star system where they could make use of their skills to start their new lives.

This left the Flagrant Swordmaidens with only two survivors of the Shining Stars Colonization Fleet. Keeping an eye on a single prince and expert pilot was a lot easier than keeping watch over hundreds of ship ratings, mech pilots, mech technicians, colony administrators, middle managers, and more.

As the refugees slowly boarded the shuttles that brought them to the last stop before entering sandmen territory, Ves wondered what the retainers thought at being separated from the prince they pledged their loyalty to. Monarchies took oaths of loyalty a lot more seriously than republics.

"Do you Swordmaidens really mean it when you are giving these refugees new lives?" Ves asked.

"Hey, even if we're pirates, we aren't that unreliable." Ketis immediately pushed back. "You already know that highly-educated and highly-skilled specialists are in high demand in the frontier. With the conditions we're providing them, they can easily get picked up by any band of pirates. Whether they'll remain free or be forced into slavery after they join their crews after that is none of our business."

He should have expected such an answer. "If the retainers know what's good for the, they'll stick together. Their mech pilots are of a high standard and they still have a decent number of intact mechs left among them to constitute a small pirate gang or mercenary corps. If they split up though, the non-combatants among them won't be able to survive the frontier."

For all he criticized the frontier's obsession over placing an undue importance on personal strength, it did make sense for people here to be able to protect themselves. Those who possessed highly desirable skills but lacked both

escorts and the ability to protect themselves became juicy prizes to any pirates who didn't have any scruples about enslaving new crewmembers.

These people from the Dark Plasma Star Sector were about to have a really hard time if they hadn't internalized the rules of the frontier.

Once the Flagrant Swordmaidens dropped off the refugees, they turned around and headed towards the nearest Lagrange point while in full view of the Sandcastle and its gaggle of local pirates.

Though the space station and the pirates who frequented it possessed a powerful background, they were very far away from the effective sphere of influence from the Dragon Alliance. The Flagrant Swordmaidens possessed enough firepower to inflict heavy damage on the outpost if provoked.

Only after the fleet transitioned back into FTL did everyone sigh in relief. The pirates at the Sandcastle got rid of the scary allied fleet, while the Flagrant Swordmaidens didn't have to worry about pirates starting anything stupid.

While the entire fleet stood down from yellow alert and everyone shed their hazard suits or armor suits, the entire crew suddenly woke up to the fact that they were crossing into the deep frontier!

"Damn! Aren't we intruding into the interior of the sandmen empire!?" Ves questioned.

"Hey, don't worry, teacher." Ketis reassured him. "We have that blessing from the Church of Haatumak to protect us. As long as we enjoy this blessing, we don't have a thing to worry about!"

"That blessing only stops the sandmen from tracking us with their long-ranged sensors, right? It doesn't work if the sandmen have a presence in the same star system as we are. Since we are entering the core space of the sandmen race, we're bound to bump into their colonies a lot!"

The dangers of the deep frontier surpassed the near frontier by an order of magnitude!

In the near frontier, they mostly needed to guard against pirates, many of whom wouldn't dare to provoke a large fleet like the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

The deep frontier on the other hand posed a very different threat! One that couldn't be intimidated or negotiated with like other humans!

### **Chapter 729 Perilous Destination**

The fact that the Flagrant Swordmaidens entered the deep frontier hit home among the rank-and-file. The Vandals may be a lot less familiar with the frontier than the Swordmaidens, but once they heard the stories, they started developing nightmares about entire sandstorms engulfing their fleet.

Trespassing sandmen space was as perilous as their run through Vesian space! Danger lurked in every star system, and the main form of protection they relied on consisted of some inscrutable religious blessing by a bunch of whack jobs who worshipped some alien entity named Haatumak.

The lack of understanding and the difficulty of comprehending their circumstances led a lot of Vandals to grumble about their mission. Had the Starlight Megalodon really crash-landed in the middle of sandmen space? How come the CFA battleship hadn't been chewed into bits by the sandmen that reigned over this territory?

To the chief engineer, it made more sense that the Starlight Megalodon would be found in such an out-of-the-way location.

As Ves and Chief Avanaeon gathered together in the corner of the shuttle bay of the Shield of Hispania, they tinkered with the salvaged fragments of the stealth shuttles from the battle against the Masters of Combat.

So far, they hadn't achieved much progress, but Ves hadn't been able to put his full attention to this side project until now.

With a new pair of high-powered gadgets hanging from his toolbelt, he completed one of his necessary preparations to survive the oncoming storm.

Now, he just needed to figure out how stealth tech work and reconstruct a working stealth shuttle in order to finish the other vital component of his contingency plan.

As Ves and Avanaeon comfortably collaborated on figuring out the inner workings of the stealth shuttle, they chatted about many different topics.

"What do you think about the deep frontier and the fact that our objective might be there?" The chief engineer.

Currently, the pair performed some targeted scans on outer hull fragments with a specialized scanner they cobbled up just for this purpose. The previous scanners hadn't been able to pick up the special internal structure of the wondrously crafted stealth plating. Their quality exceeded anything the both of them had seen before, but the problem that came with it was that they needed better equipment to behold their full majesty.

Ves slid his fingers in his air as if he turned an invisible knob, causing the resolution of the scanner to adjust by a minute proportion. "I think that the Starlight Megalodon won't be easy to reach. You know the sandmen love to suck the juice out of high-energy objects. A battleship is one of the most pinnacle inventions of the human race. There's hardly a higher concentration of energy to be found among our massive works besides the dyson swarms that surround the suns of highly developed star systems."

The strength and development of the human race or any alien race rested on their ability to harvest and harness energy.

While humans needed to invent a lot of technology to interact with energy through the medium of machines, the sandmen interacted a lot more directly with energy.

The sandmen race never made any use of machines or any external objects for that matter. Their houses and colonies consisted of large agglomerations of their own race akin to sandcastles. Their ships consisted of their own bodies shaped in balls, ovals, cubes or any other geometric shape their slightly smarter sandmen leader preferred.

In other words, the sandmen didn't make use of technology. They embodied it! As a strange race that resembles bots and whose bodies consisted of sand grain-like material, they animated themselves through extremely obscure means. Even if their entire race resembled something magical, they couldn't escape the fundamental requirement that all races hungered for: energy.

Both Ves and Chief Avanaeon knew this fundamental truth.

"I've developed a theory why the Starlight Megalodon somehow manages to stay intact after being stranded for several hundred years in sandmen space." The chief engineer began. "You heard about how the Starlight Megalodon originally led a starship into alien space for some subjugation mission or something, right?"

Ves nodded. "Now that I think about it, the CFA likely sent out the subjugation fleet to teach the sandmen race a lesson."

"Well, while the rest of the fleet emerged out of FTL intact, their flagship inexplicably went missing. Since they knew that the Megalodon transitioned into FTL but didn't come out, the CFA thought that it encountered some kind of freak accident related to the higher dimensions."

"I've already heard that theory. What's your point?"

"My point is that whatever anomaly gripped the the Starlight Megalodon out of place may still be active until today. The vagaries of spacetime and what happens in the higher dimensions are poorly understood even now. Take it from me. Even though I'm a chief engineer, I barely understand what goes on

inside an FTL drive! And that's only the more basic models that is sufficient to propel a combat carrier. The FTL drive of a battleship is hundreds of times more powerful and complex! I've even heard that capital ships activate multiple FTL drives in conjunction! Think of the complexity involved with such a technical feat!"

Ves shuddered at the thought. He had come into touch with FTL drives several times, and while he didn't had the pleasure of tinkering with them or understanding how they worked, he knew that they worked on incredibly mind-boggling principles.

"So you think the Starlight Megalodon is still caught in some kind of.. multidimensional pothole? A spacetime ditch?"

"Something like that. I heard you took part in the Glowing Planet campaign on behalf of some private outfit. Did you experience what happened at the end?"

Avanaeon's words immediately made Ves recall the temporal anomaly that emerged as the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion slugged it out with each other. He remembered the moment when one of the transports carrying a dimensional smoother loaned by the MTA got blown up by a misdirected missile!

The bizarre time loop that centered around the impact site scared the wits out of the hardened Brighter and Vesian soldiers! The two forces immediately ended their battle without a clear winner or loser in their desperation to escape the strange phenomenon that resulted out of their negligent actions.

According to the rumors that occasionally swirled around the galactic net, the temporal anomaly still existed to this date, looping time in an unending cycle that saw the missile impact the transport which caused it and its crew to be blown up into bits, only for the entire event to play back in reverse!

Forward and reverse, destruction and rebirth, this endless cycle might very well persist until the end of reality itself! Some even say that the people aboard the transport would forever live through the agony of experiencing rebirth and death without any way to escape their cruel and undeserved fate!

"Damn." Ves said as his mind began to conjure up all kinds of awful possibilities. "Well, it offers an explanation why the Starlight Megalodon can still persist in sandmen space, but doesn't that mean we won't be able to reach the battleship as well?"

"Their shuttles made it out, right? It took the descendants of the original crew of the battleship several hundred years, but they managed to slip out some shuttles. If these craft can get out, I bet the same channel or means can be used to get in, don't you think?"

It likely wouldn't be so simple or straightforward as that. Any channel that could stop a sandmen wouldn't be easy for humans to traverse.

Ves worried about what they might find at the end of their search. He already had to take into account the threat from sandmen, rivals, errant pirates, their uninvited guests, the Fourth Prince and his still-loyal expert pilot and now the spacetime anomalies as well. It was as if the entire galaxy opposed their mission!

"Finally!" The chief engineer erupted. "This custom scanner is finally penetrating through the surface layer! Come look at this, Ves! It's beautiful!"

They both resumed their preoccupation with figuring out the inner workings of stealth tech.

Over a period of several days, Ves devoted the majority of his time in juggling between theoretical models and broken samples of applied stealth tech.

It helped that his workload mostly subsided now that the Vandals largely completed their latest modification run. More than two-hundred landbound

mechs received an extensive round of modifications and upgrades that sacrificed a little bit of performance in exchange for increasing their ability to endure crushing gravity!

The modified mechs combined with the heavy-duty gravitic backpacks should ensure that each mech gained a short one-hour period in which they suffered minimally from the effects of extreme gravity.

The only downside to their preparations was that once the gravitic backpacks ran out of energy, the mechs could barely move at all! The only role the modifications played was to ensure the mechs didn't sustain too much damage when they weren't covered by the protective umbrellas of their gravitic backpacks.

With the resources and means at hand, the Vandals couldn't do anything about it. They had to settle for what they could achieve and hope that would be sufficient for them to contend for the Starlight Megalodon's treasures when they finally reached her location.

The entire fleet somehow knew they neared the rumored foundered battleship. Word got out that it might be a matter of days or weeks before they arrived at the coordinates of the legendary capital ship.

What would they find? A ship crash-landed on a Super Earth-like planet? The Starlight Megalodon torn to pieces and strewn about over several light-years?

Imagination ran wild. Whatever they might encounter, the battle would start in earnest at that time.

They needed to be ready for anything, because they might have the fight of their lives on their hands.

During these tense days of travel, apprehension, and waiting, Ves made decent progress into deciphering the workings of modern stealth tech, at least the most rudimentary version of it common in the galactic rim.

Ves figured out large portions of the underlying mechanics behind each means of fooling a specific type of sensors. Electromagnetic, gravitic, sonar and etcetera all needed to be counteracted at the same time in perfect ways without any mutual interference.

It was like playing a complete orchestra song by playing five different musical instruments at the same time. Not only did each instrument had to be tuned right and played correctly, they all needed to be played on the same beat and in complete coordination with each other.

All of that needed to be accomplished by a single source!

The amount of multidisciplinary tech that the developers stuffed in the stealth shuttles astounded Ves and Avanaeon. The two engineers gained a new appreciation of how many functions could be stuffed inside a single package!

While they barely got a grip at understanding all of the tech, reproducing it proved to be a more difficult challenge. Ves could immediately tell that the most sophisticated components of the stealth shuttle such as the stealth plating couldn't be reproduced with a standard 3D printer.

To produce the plating, Ves needed to reproduce a similar kind of machine. He had no idea on how to begin with such a project. It sounded as ridiculous as fabricating an entirely new model of 3D printer from scratch.

While Ves made extensive use of them and even reconstructed a broken Dortmund printer, it didn't mean he could whip out production machines on the fly!

"We can't fabricate any new plating, but we don't have to." Ves told Avanaeon while they puzzled over the problem. He picked up one of the scorched and scratched fragments that they salvaged from the debris field back then. "We have sufficient stealth plating fragments here to piece together a new set of

plating! While they're in poor condition, I think it's possible that we can restore them somehow. Restoration is easier than creation!"

Ves laid out a viable if difficult solution to go forward from here. The chief engineer considered it for a moment and reluctantly accepted it for lack of a better solution.

"Many of these fragments have scratches and tears in them. We need to see if we have enough relatively-intact portions to construct a full-sized shuttle."

### **Chapter 730 Research and Developmen**

Ves enjoyed trying to figure out the underlying workings of stealth tech. It differed remarkably from his study in ultracompact energy storage systems in that his previous side project entailed a deep dive into extremely narrow scientific subjects.

To develop his ultracompact batteries, he needed to become proficient in extremely advanced science that was way over his head in ordinary circumstances.

This was also why he suffered from so many headaches. The deeper and more profound he dove into the science, the more facts and substantiated theories made way for bold assertions and insufficiently backed beliefs.

While Ves eventually found a way to cope with the threat of mental contamination, he still would have liked to do without it hanging over his head.

Understanding stealth technology required a different approach.

Instead of diving in deeply in one or two very specialised subjects, Ves instead needed to read through a broad selection of shallow topics.

'Shallow' being a relative term here, because better applications of stealth tech utilized more profound sciences not inferior to the level utilized to make ultracompact batteries work.

The best way to view stealth tech was to see it as a fusion of different functions, each of them geared towards nullifying a different detection method. To get the most basic form of stealth tech working, they didn't need to be sophisticated, but they absolutely had to be able to work together in unison without a single hitch!

After all, what was the point of using optical camouflage to hide a stealth shuttle from plain view when an observation platform could switch from optical sensors to heat sensors?

To counteract this easy means, the stealth shuttle needed to incorporate heat absorption technology, so that it didn't radiate its heat like a furnace when it activated its stealth.

Yet even if a shuttle managed to hide itself from both optical and heat sensors, an observation platform would still be able to detect it by using other means, from sound pressure to detecting its mass.

While Ves and Avanaeon slowly became familiar with the standard solutions to solve each means of detecting something under stealth, the true difficulty revolved around stuffing it all in one small package.

Tying them all together involved a lot of auxiliary technologies such as miniaturization and even a bit of energy compression!

Ves possessed a big advantage over Avanaeon in that he had access to much of the relevant literature from the Skull Architect. The chief engineer had to make due with scouring the local textbooks and academic journals in the ship's local database.

Because stealth technology was a restricted tech in the galaxy, the local database didn't allow any random person access to all of the core technologies needed to reproduce an application of stealth tech. Avanaeon encountered many roadblocks in his own research that he simply gave up his

research and dedicated most of his available time to analyzing the salvaged fragments.

In this, the chief engineer found more success. He managed to decipher the structure and layout of the individual components. Even if he didn't understand the underlying theories why they were built that way, Ves stepped in at that moment to provide the missing link.

Still, even if they eventually managed to build up their base of knowledge, they still needed to fix up the fragments into a working product.

They quickly met with another problem when they tallied the exact condition of all the stealth plating, which was the most important component of the stealth shuttle.

"We don't have enough salvaged plating to reconstruct the original shuttle." Chief Avanaeon declared with a grim expression. "Initially, I thought we gathered more than enough duplicates to build a complete shuttle and have some fragments to spare, but if you look at their condition, then some of them are far worse off than others. If we cut out all the unrecoverable portions, then the healthier fragment that remains isn't enough to constitute sixty percent of the original shuttle."

The two of them stared at each other in silence.

"Then why not build a smaller shuttle?" Ves posed. "The Masters of Combat employed the original stealth shuttle as an assault vehicle meant for hostile boarding attempts. It's bigger and sturdier in order to convey as much

The chief engineer shook his head. "I already thought about that, but it's far harder than it sounds. The stealth plating is just one of the core components of stealth tech. There's all these other components that are buried in the guts of the shuttle that are essential to the systems as well. We can use less plating, but we can't skimp out on all the other necessary components.

They're already as small as they can be, and it's impossible for us to compress them into a smaller size."

"What does that mean for us?"

"Well, if we design a smaller shuttle, it's going to come out with the internal makeup of a typical aircar. There's barely enough seating space for a couple of people while the rest of the shuttle frame is taken up by the power reactor, the sublight propulsion, the fuel tanks, the energy cells, the stealth components and you name it! The more we shrink the design, the less and less cargo and people it can actually carry."

That did sound like a significant problem. What was the point of a stealth shuttle if in the end it only possessed enough passenger capacity to transport a single dog?

Both of them knew that the original stealth shuttle model already did their best to miniaturize its components. A massive research and development team would be required to squeeze them into even smaller packages.

"Let's design a mockup of how this shuttle will look like." Ves proposed. "Even if we have to cut back on the cargo and passenger space, it doesn't really matter because we aren't looking to replicate a fully functional assault vehicle."

Ves actually bent the truth there. One of the biggest reasons why he was researching stealth tech in the first place was to create a potential means of escape.

The Starlight Megalodon attracted multiple different forces and possibly the sandmen as well. Ves envisioned a possibility in the future where they might be surrounded by enemies from without and within.

If the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens buckled under the pressure, Ves wanted to have access to a good means of escape, and what better than to board a shuttle that normal sensors wouldn't be able to detect!

In fact, the only sensors that could reliably detect the stealth shuttles were the stealth detection arrays that the Vandals built into their combat carriers and some of their Inheritor mechs.

While technically this meant that they'd be able to track down the escaping shuttle if Ves made off with it, if the fleet was already doomed then it hardly mattered anyway.

However, as Chief Avanaeon worked alongside for Ves on the same project for a while now, he eventually figured out why Ves showed so much enthusiasm. As opposed to Ves who considered it a matter of life and death, the chief engineer only treated it as an amusing distraction.

"Are you ready to desert us or something?" Avanaeon abruptly asked one day.

"No! Of course not!"

"Then why are you putting so much effort into getting this stealth shuttle to work?"

Ves knew he had to come clean to a point. "Because I'm rather insecure. You know this confidential mission stinks. How many light-years have we traveled from the Bright Republic? It's doubtful that we can even encounter a single Vesian in the deep frontier! Instead, we're off on a wild goose chase while contending against many other known and unknown threats. If you think about what we're up against, you'd want to leave an escape route out for yourself as well."

Avanaeon fell silent at that. He already knew subconsciously that the Flagrant Vandals engaged in an exceedingly threatening endeavor, but as a bona fide

Vandal, his commitment to his fellow servicemen prevented him from harboring any cowardly thoughts.

"I can't blame you for harboring such thoughts. I don't want to agree with you, but..."

"Look, if nothing goes wrong, then the shuttle will remain here unused and untouched." Ves quickly added. "It's like building an extra escape pod. Building it will increase our chances and gives us extra options to survive a potential catastrophe."

"Alright, Ves. You've convinced me somewhat. Not entirely, but enough to let you proceed with what you're doing. I have a condition, though."

"Let me hear it." Ves requested.

"If you intend to build a working stealth shuttle as an escape vehicle, then I want in on it. We can co-design the shuttle and implement enough security locks so that it will take the both of us to activate it. This will allow both of us to get off the Shield of Hispania if she's about to fonder, while preventing either of us from lifting off prematurely before the other has made it to the shuttle. What do you think about this proposal?"

What Avanaeon offered was partially blackmail and partially a compromise. Ves hated to depend on others, and to put in the requirement that the stealth shuttle would only be able to start if both of them were physically present presented a major limitation in any possible escape plan.

It meant that the stealth shuttle would only be able to work if both Ves and Avanaeon made it to the shuttle bay alive!

Yet while Ves wanted to reject the proposal, he really had no choice but to accept. If Ves refused, Avanaeon could easily kick up a fuss and bring their project to the attention of Major Verle.

In addition, while Ves knew how to design a mech in his sleep, designing a shuttle was a different matter entirely. Avanaeon possessed a much deeper understanding of the inner workings of a shuttle.

He not only possessed the ability to reconstruct the original stealth shuttle if he had access to a sufficient amount of fragments, he also possessed the ability to reconfigure the original design in a smaller version that used up less fragments!

Ves valued the latter capability, but it was exactly this that no one else but Chief Avanaeon could accomplish!

For better or worse, they were both dependent on each other to complete the stealth shuttle project.

"Alright then, chief. You've got yourself a deal."

They shook hands on their little agreement.

With a mutual understanding between them, some of the barriers between their collaboration disappeared. The chief engineer even reshuffled his schedule and spent more time on the project in order to complete it in time.

After determining that they really couldn't proceed with the original shuttle design, they both pooled their skills together to come up with a rough sketch of a smaller version.

Their unique strengths meshed well with each other. Ves possessed an abundant amount of design experience which he used to guide the design process. Creating a new shuttle design based off an existing design sounded easy, but turned out to be an intimidating process to anyone else.

Avanaeon understood what each component did and how to put them together. However, just because he could explain the workings of a shuttle

didn't mean he could design a new one. The act of designing required a special touch that only practiced designers possessed.

Therefore, the design that flowed from their hands truly couldn't have been put together by either of them alone. The draft design showed off a small, stubby shuttle that dealt with the limited amount of intact stealth plating in the most logical fashion possible.

"It kind of looks like a squashy cube." Ves remarked as they both took a step back to evaluate their sketch. "It doesn't even have a proper conal shape. I doubt this thing will even survive atmospheric entry."

Avanaeon shrugged. "While I admit it doesn't look very cool, it's structure is the most efficient configuration the simulations has found in terms of maximizing the amount of cargo and passengers it can carry."

"...You're not very good at art, are you?"