

Chapter 741 A Personal Ideal

Ves immediately noticed her special state. Her eyes became dilated as she stared at the generic Vesian-style spaceborn swordsman mech secured in front of her. Her short green hair ruffled a bit as her head tilted upwards and beheld the mech's proud and unyielding head.

To Ves, the swordsman mech didn't seem very special to him. It was a cheap model that the Vandals looted in one of their many past raids into Vesian space. Yet despite its relative age and lack of distinguishing strengths, Ves found it to be a basic, dependable mech that survived battles where more extravagant mech models failed.

Frontier outfits generally prefer designs known for being dependable. Mech pilots wanted a trusty battle brother that lasted for years through frequent abuse and lack of adequate maintenance.

Naturally, the Vandals possessed different priority than the pirate gangs who often found themselves short of mech technicians. Yet this mech model exemplified the frontier style the most out of all of the other mechs in the Vandal mech roster.

Ves still remembered the Redemption Duel he took part in back when he stepped foot on the Temple of Haatumak. His hastily-upgraded Evaporating Spear competed directly against Mayra's Redemption Rose.

Though the conditions of the duel warped the comparison value between their designs, and his mech ultimately lost against her Redemption Rose, he ultimately gained a few lessons out of that battle.

One of them was that he'd been able to sense of Mayra's design philosophy. While Ves couldn't be completely certain what that might look like, Mayra definitely incorporated an emphasis on reliability and perhaps a combination of mobility and offensive power.

He had a feeling he only scratched the surface of her principles, but whatever they may ultimately be, her design style reflected the prevailing customs of the frontier.

Yet for some reason, Mayra did not wish for Ketis to follow in her footsteps. While she hadn't said anything concrete to Ves, she subtly implied that she wanted Ketis to develop a design philosophy that diverged from the classic frontier style.

Ves couldn't figure out why Mayra wanted that for Ketis, considering the young woman would make for a great mech designer based in the Faris Star Region if she applied herself to her career instead of her training.

While he filled up the gaps in his student's comprehension of the orthodox mech industry's institutional norms, he did not expect her to become a bona-fide classical mech designer. Ketis could never compete in the areas the graduates of the Leemar Institute of Technology or Ansel University of Mech Design excelled at due to their fantastic teaching environments.

With teaching facilities worth as much as a large mech manufacturer and Senior Mech Designers as their professors, these highly prestigious schools had been designed from the start to pump out mature mech designers capable of entering the mech industry in their own right.

How could someone homeschooled by a Journeyman with an inconsistent upbringing herself beat those who survived the brutal curriculum of those institutions?

Ves adopted the same strategy for Ketis as he did with the Blackbeak. Instead of competing directly against the established players of a particular market category, he instead turned to a less popular market category or segment.

In his opinion, Mayra didn't want Ketis to be a pure frontier pirate designer with all the faults that came with it. Ves did not see any hope for her to

become an orthodox mech designer either without actually going through a decent school, which was impossible due to her age and her origin.

So why not combine the two? Ideally, Ketis would take the best traits from both approaches to mech design and mix-and-match them to form a hybrid style that became her hallmark. If she combined the meticulousness and the emphasis on consistency in quality with the freewheeling, unrestrained design impulses of the lawless frontier, then something truly great may come out of this combination!

Of course, anything complex that could result in a benefit might also go the other way. A combination of the worst traits.. Ves could hardly imagine what such a result would look like.

The complete immorality of the frontier combined with the intense greed and hunger for market share?

Now that he thought about it, that did sound a bit familiar... a few weeks ago, didn't he worry about the Skull Architect doing the exact same thing?

...Yeah.

ANYWAY, under his stellar and faultless instruction, his cute little student surely wouldn't end up as a devil among pirate designers.

She never displayed any ambitions of starting her own business either. While Ves showed her the ropes of what a mech designer needed to take into account when starting their own businesses, he merely wanted to give her a proper grasp on the economics and the cost and resource constraints of building mechs.

From her own mouth, she once described the two most prevalent ways that pirate designers got into trouble.

The first way was to pay too little attention to their own protection. Anyone weak in the frontier never survived very long by themselves.

The second way they got into trouble was to get ripped off or unknowingly incur a huge amount of debt. Many mech designers who emerge from the frontier usually possessed a poor grasp on the business fundamentals of their own profession. It was easy for them to get carried away and before they knew it a black market organization owned their souls!

Ves made sure to instill some basic business sense into her thick horned skull in order to make sure she wouldn't bankrupt the Swordmaidens or any other future ventures she might pursue.

"Ah!" The woman suddenly cried. "I almost had it! That feeling!"

"Did you get to discover your own design philosophy?"

"Not quite.." She shook her head in regret. "I kind of let my mind spaz out a bit. I was thinking about my sisters, my warrior training, and my Swordmaiden graduation ceremony."

"Your graduation ceremony? Isn't that the time when you set off to an untamed world and hunted down a big beast on foot armed with nothing but your sword?"

"Yeah." The girl patted the bones adorned on her suit of heavy combat armor.

"These bones here and the reddish lizard skin I wear for my regular uniform prove that I've personally killed a Wistra dragon! They're one of the apex predators of a little exoplanet in the frontier. These bones are only a fraction the size of the real thing, you know!"

"And your design philosophy is related to the Wistra dragon?"

"More like my hunt for the beast. I roamed through the jungle there for more than a week, using every survival skill at my disposal to track one down and stalk it I found an opportunity to best it alone in open combat!"

Ves looked impressed at her. While he had no idea how formidable a Wistra dragon might be, the Swordmaidens always picked a worthy exobeast to demonstrate their feats of strength. "Why not employ an ambush?"

"Pff! Ambushes are for the weak!" She contemptuously dismissed the option. "The Swordmaidens aren't like the other slimy pirate gangs that won't hesitate to resort to dirty tricks. A trick may work once or twice but never all the time! It's our belief that as long as we are strong enough to beat our opponents in a straight fight, we'll never show any weakness!"

Ves found that to be a rather crude philosophy, but the Swordmaidens made it work so far. He tried to shift the topic back to her struggle to form her design philosophy.

"Okay, so there's the hunt and challenge you completed that excites you. What about it specifically makes your heart pump faster?"

Ketis closed her eyes and tried to find that special feeling where everything just fit together.

"It's not the hunt. While I enjoyed it, it's also stressful and uncomfortable and I don't feel like designing a tracking mech."

"It's not the one-on-one duel. While my matchup with the Wistra dragon has definitely given me an opportunity to prove that I can stand on my own, I don't feel like insisting on a duel when it's easier to throw multiple mechs at your enemy."

"Then what is it? What portion of your graduation ceremony has continued to stick with you and define you as a person and a mech designer?"

"I think.. It's the ferocity of the battle! I felt so alive at that time when I faced the Wistra dragon! All of my thoughts blended together and I let my instincts and my training take over. I completely trusted myself to win and survive! It's.. I can't explain it, but that rush of exhilaration and those brushes of death really made me feel that becoming a Swordmaiden was the best thing that could have happened to me! And that moment when I whittled the Wistra dragon down until it made a mistake! That chop! One running jump and one heavy blow to the neck and its head is parted from its body! Nothing in my life can top that moment!"

Ves crossed his arms. "You're recounting the best moment of your life so far, but how do you translate that into your design philosophy?"

"Uhh.. good question."

"Now we're back to square one. Well not quite. You've pinned down a powerful experience in the past that has influenced the rest of your life and that you can use to fit your design philosophy into. Right now, you said that fighting the Wistra dragon is the best moment of your life. Can you imagine anything related to mech design that might top that magnificence?"

She looked at him as if her gears had become stuck. "Uhhh.."

"Use some imagination! Try and think what will happen a hundred years from now. Let's say you've had a lot of lucky breaks and advanced to a Senior Mech Designer after a lot of luck. Now you are about to complete the culmination of all of your research and efforts. What kind of mech will you design that will push you to threshold of Master? What kind of impossible and wildly ambitious swordsman mech design have you brought into being that can astound the entire galaxy?"

"I don't think I'll ever become a Senior.."

"Don't ever say never. Didn't I taught you to always look ahead? There's no harm in harboring great ambitions! As long as you are moving forward, then even if you eventually halt half-way, it's better than never moving from your starting line. So stop thinking that you never have the chance to become a Senior and just imagine it already!"

It took some more guidance from Ves, but Ketis eventually closed her eyes again and sank into a deep enough mood to be able to imagine such a fantasy.

"I think I see.. I've become a Senior now.. I'm really rich.. the Swordmaidens are one of the biggest gangs in the frontier now.. I have a fluffy bed the size of a corvette to bounce around and sleep in.. I've picked up three tamed and genetically modified Wistra dragons as my personal pets.."

Ves gently tapped her armor. "Let's stay focused on your mechs rather than your material possessions."

"Ah, okay. Mechs.. mechs.. well, I designed a lot of swordsman mechs. Fat ones. Skinny ones. Fast ones. Strong ones. They're all different, because I like to see how each of them perform. Landbound. Aerial. Spaceborn. It doesn't matter to me. A swordsman mech is a swordsman mech. I would even design an aquatic mech if it isn't so different from the rest."

"Okay, so you dream of designing a diverse mix of swordsman mechs. That's a good ambition to have." He said encouragingly. "You're getting close. Now, try to put your designs in a row. Fat, skinny, expensive, cheap, landbound, spaceborn, it doesn't matter. Just try to visualize all of them at a distance. Now, what do they have in common? What ties them all together?"

Ketis let herself be influenced by his voice and fell even deeper into the illusion. Right now, it seemed like their environment fell away. The mech

stables, the swordsman mech in front of them, even Ves himself faded from her sight.

All she saw was what her imagination projected into her mind's eye!

As the fuzzy outlines of her design became more clear, the eclectic collection of designs started to shine.

What did they share in common?

What tied them together?

What aspect about their designs carried a distinctive mark that could have only been designed by her?

"It's.. I can see it.. my design philosophy.. centers around sharpness! It centers around heaving your arms and bringing down your sword in a single blow! It centers around chopping the toughest things apart no matter how impressive it is! My mechs are all armor breakers!"

Ketis had finally found her design philosophy!

Chapter 742 An Extreme Worth Pursuing

After she finished uttering her design philosophy, she closed her eyes and basked in the aftermath of her mental enlightenment. She had dug into the deepest core of her being and discovered the very essence of what she subconsciously pursued in her designs!

Ves let her process her newly gained feelings and thoughts. With regards to design philosophy, many mech designers didn't have too much trouble formulating one that suited their interest. Some even found their groove before they even graduated from school.

Such mech designers possessed absolute confidence in their mission and their beliefs. These gifted, strong-willed mech designers had a bright future ahead if they didn't screw anything else up. Ves always envied such figures,

which included the enigmatic classmate who always seemed to be a step ahead of the rest.

"She was always better than us from the start. It was obvious that she had already found her design philosophy and focus long before the rest of us finished our fundamental courses."

Still, when it came to discovering one's design philosophy, speed may not always be to their favor. What did a mech designer really know if all they designed so far consisted of a few practice assignments?

Truly focused individuals who knew right from the start what kind of mechs they wanted to design only popped up once every cohort of students at a large institution as most.

To most mech designers including Ves, their philosophies became shaped by their experiences and their design work after they graduated. Only after jumping off the cliff and spreading their wings would they truly be able to tell which direction they wanted to fly towards. What paradise lay at the end of their flight journey? Every bird preferred to reach a different island!

As Ves looked back to Ketis as she gradually recovered her wits, he thought she should feel lucky to find a direction in her life and career so soon. She picked a good one as well, one that resonated with her very being!

He knew that some mech designers never found the right philosophy, or only manage to discover it a decade after they began their careers.

Yet the real danger came from picking the wrong design philosophy! Some made their choices in haste. Others formulated their philosophies without exploring the full range of possibilities that they might be able to design.

The classic example came from mech designers who only possessed practical experience with landbound mechs and formed a design philosophy related to them. Later in their careers, they came in touch with spaceborn

mechs and found to their surprise that they worked better with space-capable mechs than machines bound to the land!

Yet it was too late for them to change their minds!

While they could bend their original design philosophy out of shape in order to accomodate spaceborn mechs, that was not how the growth and adjustment of design philosophies worked.

The progression of design philosophies revolved around a refinement of methods and approaches.

In most cases, the design philosophy grew more narrow and specific as a mech designer advanced. Sometimes, their philosophies made a leftward or rightward turn, but they unceasingly progressed forward.

A turn too drastic might turn their progress backwards. That would be an absolute disaster for mech designers because a regression inflicted enormous damage to a design philosophy.

Once it bent too much, it broke, causing the mech designers to lose everything that distinguished their designs from the competition!

To be honest, Ves had never met someone who foolishly broke their own design philosophies, but by all accounts they lived miserable life as no one wanted to purchase their listless mechs whose designs were completely devoid of inspiration.

"Ah, sorry for spazzing out again teacher." Ketis apologized to him after she pulled herself out of her afterglow. "I.. I kind of lost my mind there.. but this design philosophy! It sings to me in a way that nothing else can! It's been there all along but I was too blind to see it up to now! I've been fascinated with sharpness ever since I received my first practice sword!"

Ketis abruptly reached behind her back and grabbed her floating scabbard. With one smooth, practiced movement, she unsheathed her greatsword and held its blade in front of her face. Her powerful servo-enhanced maneuver whipped up the air and added substance to her move.

"Do you know that upon completing their graduation ceremony, every new Swordmaiden gets to receive a full-fledged greatsword by the commander herself? She commissions them from a renowned swordsmith who set up shop in Malligan's Pitstop. These aren't regular swords, as you can see. They're integrated with several systems and are forged with both exotics and metals. Did you know what I love the most about the sword that marks me as a Swordmaiden?"

"They're sharp?"

"That's exactly what impressed me! They're sharp! Sharper than the sword I wielded in my hunt, sharper than any practice sword I've ever gripped! Look at what I can do!" She grinned, and abruptly turned her blade until its tip pointed down and drove it straight through the deck!

Not again!

"Ketis! Don't poke the deck whenever you feel like it! Repairing that slit is a big pain in the butt for the crew!"

She looked rather unrepentant for her impulsive action. Ves didn't know how the Swordmaidens kept their ships together if they kept stabbing their swords everywhere like they pleased!

Obviously, she remained enamoured by her recent enlightenment. It was like she shot herself up with a half-dozen stimulants. Nothing could shake her happiness right now!

A few minutes passed as she slowly digested the influx of feelings that burst out from her heart. Various emotions roiled through her body while her mind

gained an unprecedented amount of clarity. It was as if a persistent fog suddenly cleared up from her mind!

At some point, she managed to regain her composure. She jerked her sword out of the abused deck plating and happily returned it into its floating sheath where it belonged. After she chucked it behind her back, she turned her gaze at the swordsman mech resting silently in front of them. After taking one last look, she turned around and moved towards the exit.

"I'm done here."

They slowly returned to the office. As they walked through the corridors of the ship, Ves noticed she walked with a bit more confidence and purpose than before. While Ves doubted she would ever shed her absent-minded thoughts, she had definitely gained more direction now.

Compared to her old self, the difference was both subtle and profound. Finding her design philosophy laid the foundation for greatness. While she still had a way to go, at least she got off to a good start, which had been the entire reason why Mayra sent her protege to Ves.

He finally fulfilled his debt to Mayra!

Ves felt as if a weight lifted off his mind. Each debt and obligation weighed him down, and accruing more and more of them without being able to diminish them ate at him like a rotting disease.

Once they reached the office, Ves sat on his reinforced chair and leaned back as best his seat allowed. His student's accomplishments made him happy as well. Even if he hadn't completely defined a narrow vision, overall he considered his first attempt at designing a mech designer to be a success!

"How does it feel?" He asked as she started staring off into nothing. His voice pulled her back into the present. "Don't get distracted now. You've had your eureka moment. Now you need to reflect on it properly so you know what you

are getting into. I know that articulation isn't your best suit, but it's necessary for you to translate the feelings your design philosophy gives you into words."

"What?" She gave him a puzzled look.

Ves sighed. Did she deliberately act so simple or was she truly so dense?

"Just talk about whatever is on your mind when you think about your design philosophy."

"Hmm.." She trailed off a bit as she thought hard on her new feelings. "I feel like I want to take my greatsword, multiply its size by at least thirty times, and give it to a swordsman mech that moves just like me! I want to design a mech just like that!"

"That sounds like a good project to pursue, but perhaps not as your very first project." He carefully advised her. "Don't limit your imagination to your own physique and sword style. I bet that some of your sisters in the Swordmaiden favor different styles, is that right?"

"Yeah. Not every sister wants to wield a greatsword, though most of us do. Maybe I can copy their body structure and their sword style and adapt them to my other designs."

"You only have so many Swordmaidens to copy. Gaining some inspiration from the fighting styles of your fellow is a good way to get into the spirit of designing a mech, but this method may become a crutch if you depend on it too much. I suggest you do this a couple of times but try to divorce yourself from a specific style or body structure and expand your imagination."

"How can I do that, teacher?"

"Two ways. First, study battle mechatronics and become an expert in the way the internal frame and the artificial musculature affects the movement of a mech! Second, use your imagination! Design a sketch in your mind before you draw the actual lines!"

Ketis frowned a bit. "I get the first part. I've heard of battle mechatronics before. Mayra has some books about it stashed in her library. As for the other thing.. You always tell me to use my imagination, but I don't understand!!"

"Imagination is the canvas of our creativity." Ves explained succinctly. "It's an imaginary plane in your mind where you can conjure up any symbol, any shape and even entire designs in your mind. Just think about the following. How come good mech designers are able to design fantastic designs of rifleman mechs while being abysmal marksmen in their real lives?"

"Uhhh.."

"Just look at me. Up to this moment, I designed two original designs, both of which are commercial successes in their market segments. My first original design is a landbound medium knight optimized for offense while my second original design is a premium landbound rifleman mech that can do interesting things with lasers. Now, I never underwent close to the grueling training that you went through. So how come my mechs are so desirable?"

"Uhhhh... I guess it has to do with expertise?"

"Expertise combined with imagination!" Ves corrected her. "Imagination is the starting point to every design project. We construct a vision of our desired end product in our minds. While this is just the first step in any proper project, it is in fact the most crucial phase of all, because a good start can facilitate the other phases of the design process while a bad start can plunge the entire project into a dead end!"

"What does that have to do with designing a mech when you have no clue how to fight like that mech?"

"Imagination liberates you from the constraints of the human physique. Remember that while a humanoid mech is often based around the performances of peak human bodies, a mech is a machine, not a body of

flesh and blood! Can a mech turn around its head by a full turn without snapping its neck? Many sure do! The same goes for rotating the torso. Most frontline mechs feature this freely rotatable torso in order to facilitate firing on the move."

Ketis started to get it. "So your point is that a mech can be so much more than a copy of the human body if I exercise my imagination?"

"Yes! Remember you are not limited to a faithful human form. A mech frame allows for so much more, and it is your imagination that provides the room for your creativity to come up with a new and radical vision. Plenty of mech designers who have never wielded a sword have been able to design successful swordsman mechs before. Then there are the mech designers who design bestial mechs. It's not like they ever transformed themselves into a tiger or a centaur, right? It's all in their minds!"

"I understand now. If I ever want to go far with designing my mechs, I've got to transcend the human form and stop regarding my mechs as giant humans. They're machines that I can shape in every way I want."

Ves clapped his gauntlets. "That's the spirit of a true mech designer! Even if we aren't personally adept in fighting, we can still create the most impressive fighting machines in the galaxy, and it's all thanks to our imagination. Never forget this lesson."

He had given his final lesson to Ketis. While he had many more words of wisdom to share if he really wanted to, he deemed her to be ready enough to set out on her own.

Chapter 743 Next Frontier

After Ketis graduated from the University of Ves, nothing much changed for the pair. Technically, Ves should have shoed her out of his nest and cart her back to the Jaded Sword.

Yet neither of them brought up the topic of leaving. At her current state, Ketis wouldn't be of much help to Mayra back at Lydia's Swordmaidens. She played no substantial role at the Flagrant Vandals either, but she continued to pick up little lessons here and there simply from osmosis by staying in his presence.

Ves found that he liked the companionship of another mech designer regardless of their skill level. While he benefited quite a lot from bouncing off the ideas of someone more skilled like Iris Jupiter from the Vesian Revolutionary Front, he also gained a surprising amount by rehashing basic concepts to his student.

Besides, designing mechs could be rather lonely, and without someone poking him every now and then he had a tendency to get caught up in a particular design project.

He should really have a mech designer by his side all the time when he returned home.

In any case, even if Ketis finished all of her courses, she still had a lot to learn.

"Have you ever thought about designing your first original mech?" He asked out of the blue.

"What?! I haven't even designed too many variants yet! I still need more practice!"

"Ah, that's right." He smiled. Having already transitioned to designing original mechs, he forgot how hard this hurdle could be. "Designing original mechs is the true path of a mech designer. As a new mech designer, you should aim to reach that point as fast as possible. It's easier to design variants because the designers of the base model already took care of the difficult stuff, but there's not a lot of skill involved with shifting a component a few millimeters to the left or right and such. Develop variants for practice and for money, but don't look at it as an end in itself."

"So it's just a transition thing to you."

"Yup. However, many Novices and Apprentices get stuck at this phase. The gap is intimidating and the more you put it off, the harder it is to take that leap. I myself only designed two or three variants as my production models and perhaps half-a-dozen or so virtual variants for Iron Spirit before I made the jump. This is a bit too little practice for someone like you, though, so I suggest you hold off designing an original mech until you have at least twenty fully-fledged variants under our belt."

"Twenty? That will take me years!"

Ves tutted at her. "Do you think those years are wasted? They are anything but! Those precious formative years will be spent in applying your skills and becoming more familiar with the structures of different swordsman mechs. Right now, you know nothing about swordsman mechs."

"That's not true!" She burst out, indignant at his insult. Steam practically ran out of her ears!

"I mean it. Even if you like them, that doesn't mean you know how they are built and what makes them tick. Have you studied the underlying structure and layout of swordsman mechs? Have you interviewed mech pilots that favor this type of mech? Have you immersed yourself in a couple of designs and learned how they maximized their performance in certain criteria? Right now, I bet that an enthusiastic fan of swordsman mech athletes from the dueling scene know more about this type of mechs than you!"

Those fans and supporters sometimes reached hardcore levels of fanaticism. Though they didn't understand a thing about the underlying science behind mechs, they possessed an extremely sharp and intuitive grasp of the holistic performance of their favorite types of mechs.

In other words, they grasped the essence and soul of certain types of mechs.

Naturally, this phenomenon also had a tendency to turn them into armchair critics that loudly berate any perceived mistake by the mech pilot or mech designers.

While Ketis grew up alongside mechs for much of her life, her exposure to different kinds of mechs left a lot to be desired. The frontier didn't offer too many opportunities to approach other mechs without pissing off their owners.

She calmed down a bit after some thought. By now, she knew better than to argue with Ves when he criticised her. That was also because Ves had indoctrinated her to believe everything he said no matter how much it hurt.

As her teacher, he could do no wrong and everything he said was the absolute truth!

"What do you suggest, then?" She sighed. "I don't have access to the galactic net here."

"I think you should start by talking with the mech pilot of that spaceborn swordsman mech you visited earlier. You gained inspiration from it and managed to find your design philosophy, right? Maybe you should start digging into that mech and get to know it better. It's not a particularly excellent model, but among spaceborn mechs it's a good first design for anyone to really sink their teeth into if they want to design a variant."

"I can do that?"

"Sure. It's just a copy of an old Vesian mech model. Unlike our core mech models such as the Inheritors and the Hellcats, there's nothing classified about it. I'll even pass you the design schematics and some of my notes for you to play around with on your own time."

Once Ves sent her the details as well as the name of the mech pilot he plucked out from the personnel rolls, Ketis went off to explore her newly invigorated passion for swordsman mechs.

He smiled as she skipped off like a little kid visiting a candy store.

The difference between the old Ketis and the new Ketis was like the difference between night and day.

The key lay in their passion. The old Ketis followed no direction in her life and it showed. She became easily distracted and lacked focus in her studies and pursuit for mech design.

The new Ketis on the other hand acted like she had been lit on fire. Passion suffused her very body and Ves only needed to give her a minor encouragement for her to set off in pursuit of advancing her craft.

He predicted that she would take her studies more seriously from now on and press through the boring parts about mech design in hopes of a payoff in the future. Everything became easier to an artist or a designer once they found their passion. Having an ideal to strive for always got them moving forward without too much conscious thought.

Ves considered her recent evolution and reflected back on his own abnormal progression. Certainly, the System allowed him to skip ahead of some of the more tedious parts such as years-worth of studies compressed in a single moment of time.

Now that he spent some time away from the addictive properties of the System, he felt as if his time with the Vandals had cleansed some of the repercussions of his overly hasty progress. Interacting with Iris and teaching Ketis especially helped him rehash some of his previously learned concepts and internalize them properly rather than having them all dumped to the back of his mind.

"Mech design is eventually a craft." He summed up to himself. He didn't care if his hidden stalker listened in. Perhaps she might learn a thing or two. "The meaning of a craft is to make something out of it. Too much passive learning

only increases my theoretical knowledge without advancing my own distinct style of designing mechs."

He felt like doing something with his hands right now, but he had nothing on his plate. Since the Flagrant Swordmaidens estimated that they came very close to reaching the Starlight Megalodon, all of the heavy work had long come to an end. Each active mech in the Vandal mech roster received extensive upgrades and tweaks to prepare them up for a rough slog in space or on the surface of a heavy gravity planet.

Right now, most mech technicians whittled away their time by tuning up some of the mechs, which only provided small and temporary boost to their performance. Ves considered it a waste of his time to engage in such a marginal activity.

Having finished his two side projects, Ves was left with a gaping hole in his schedule. With the fleet immersed in FTL travel, Ves didn't have a way to check up on the work of his subordinates either. He had no concerns at all about the mechs aboard the Shield of Hispania, as all the mech technicians knew better than to slack off under Ves and Chief Haine.

"The only problem case are the specialists at the Gorgon's Gaze."

Thinking about the reports that emerged from that combat carrier informed him that Lisbeth Eta-Denmersken attempted to return to her old tricks. She tried to halt the shipping of the Parallax Star's spare parts to the logistics ships for recycling and attempted to influence Venerable Xie to back up her demands.

Strangely enough, while Xie behaved rather deferentially for an expert pilot, he showed no hesitation when he rejected the bulk of her suggestions.

An abundance of spare parts opened up new options, but that only benefited a mech pilot that really mastered their own mechs. Xie barely had weeks to

practice with the Parallax Star, a powerful beast of an expert mech originally tailored for a much stronger pilot.

In spite of his intensive practice sessions, so far Venerable Xie only managed to express thirty percent of the old Parallax Star's performance. Both the charges and the energy shield looked anemic compared to what Venerable O'Callahan managed to conjure up. Truly, the fabled lancer mech had fallen to a new low.

Ves sighed when he recalled all the modifications he made at the former bodyguard's request. "It's really a waste of a good machine to turn it from a pure lancer mech into a hybrid lancer/spearman mech."

It reminded him again that the fit between a mech pilot and a mech mattered more than the absolute performance of a mech on a spec sheet.

"The fit doesn't exactly come into play when it comes to basic and advanced mech pilots. Once they become an expert, the mech becomes a key component of their strength. Their skills, their piloting style as well as their resonance profiles are too distinctive to ever fully come into play with a standard mech."

It was like upgrading from eating nutrient packs to eating meals made out of natural and organic ingredients. A poor eater who couldn't afford fancy meals would be satisfied with whatever nutrient pack he managed to obtain. Two decades old, five decades old, chicken flavor, vegetable pizza flavor, it mattered little as long as they filled up the stomach and provided the essential nutrients to keep on living.

When a mech pilot became an expert, they transformed from a normal eater to a picky eater. They'd vomit if they got served with a nutrient pack. They could only eat their meals if a good chef listened to their taste preferences and cooked them up with quality ingredients.

As the chef in this analogy, Ves did not have any quality meals in his repertoire as of yet. Still, it would only be a matter of time before he designed his first expert mech. As soon as he advanced to Journeyman, he became qualified to design expert mechs customized for one specific expert pilot.

"How will my expert designs look like?" He idly mused. "It's too much for me to create an entirely new design from scratch. I'll probably design a highly-upgraded variant of my existing mech models. That's how most lower-end custom designers work."

Though experts usually turned to Senior Mech Designers to obtain a mech that fit them like a glove, Journeymen still had a chance of entering this highly exclusive market by offering budget options for alternate uses.

Experts treated their primary mechs as their trade secrets. If they showed off their main mechs too often, their enemies would be able to decipher their strengths and weaknesses.

This opened up the opportunity for Journeymen to offer cheaper expert mechs designed for practice, parade or other purposes.

Even though it wasn't quite the real thing, designing expert mechs for this purpose appealed to him in a way. He had a new itch to scratch.

Chapter 744 Shared Contemp

Idle dreams aside, thinking about designing expert mechs at this stage was like putting the cart before the horse. First, he needed to advance to Journeyman before he could contemplate his expanded options.

Ves exited the conference room, following after the armored and suited forms of the other Vandal officers. They had just survived another briefing about what they might face at the end of their destination.

Nobody knew what to expect when they finally came within reach of the Starlight Megalodon, but that did not stop Major Verle and the planners. They

held several briefings now within the past several days, each of them meant to clarify their mission and their priorities.

Contingency plans heavily came to prominence during the briefings. Everyone needed to know their roles during different events, such as if they fleet immediately encountered an ambush upon emergence, if the ships got separated from each other, if the flagship of one of the allied forces got taken out of action, if the disparate pirate gangs banded together in order to eliminate them first, and so on.

They even discussed the rather unlikely but potentially catastrophic possibility of Lydia's Swordmaidens turning against the Flagrant Vandals in the middle of a battle against other forces!

With Chopra Interstellar Security's tragic betrayal serving as a cautionary tale, the Vandals needed little psychological preparation to contemplate such a possibility.

Still, the Vandals expressed confidence that they could respond to any unexpected outcomes so long as they did not face a qualitatively better force. Even in their diminished numbers, the Verle Task Force numbered far more mechs than most pirate gangs typically fielded.

Combined with their training and formation tactics, the Flagrant Vandals should be the most powerful cohesive force at the site.

At least they would be so long if detachments from other mech regiments didn't join the party as well. As much as the Vandals didn't like to think about it, the Vandals needed to plan around the worst case scenarios, and facing a strong and powerful detachment from a legitimate military mech force instantly changed the entire equation.

Chief Haine stopped by his side. "Wanna grab a drink with me?"

"Oh. Sure."

The two went down to the lower decks and entered the ship's bar. They ignored the off-duty servicemen trying to still their nerves. Many Vandals feared what they might encounter at the end of the ride. They vastly preferred the current pattern of hopping from mostly-empty star system to star system to reaching the end of their journey.

A change marked the end of a largely peaceful pattern and the start of frequent conflict and grueling battles. Nobody expected to complete their mission without a hitch.

This wasn't their first rodeo to Ves and Chief Haine. They each dealt with the uncertainty and anticipation of what might come in the future with stoic acceptance. Why should they let their nerves destroy their moods when they had no way of influencing what might come?

As they sat down next to a quiet table and passed on their orders, a bot hovered over thirty seconds later and dropped off their drinks.

"So." Chief Haine started after she took a sip of the Shield of Hispania's signature brew. "You've been rather occupied with other matters lately. Both you and Avanaeon looked so obsessed with working on that strange black cube shuttle of yours that you even stopped attending our Pirate Empires sessions."

Ves shrugged, unapologetic about missing those meetings. "There's a time for fun and games, and that time isn't now. It hasn't been for the entire month. We all have duties to attend to and preparations to make. I'm a busy man and I can only be in one place at a time."

"If you say so."

They quietly sipped their identical drinks. Compared to the signature brew of the Gorgon's Gaze, the Shield of Hispania tasted a bit less intense, but it at least lacked the filmy aftertaste.

"So what did you call me here for? I doubt it's to catch up on old times." He said.

The chief technician took her time in answering his question. "Actually, I don't really know. I wanted to be in the company with someone who isn't a real Vandal, I guess. You're different from the others on this ship."

"I'm not a real Vandal? I would think by now that I've at least become an honorary member of your club!"

She laughed. "Nice try, but you're not quite there yet. To be a Vandal is to be our brother or sister. Have you seen how close the Swordmaidens are to each other? Of course you have, you have that little devil following you around half of the time. Well, to me, my fellow Vandals are like family. I care for them and stick with them through thick and thin. As for you... well, you don't really fit in. None of you mech designers really do, for that matter, but some at least try their best. You on the other hand..."

"Perhaps I've been a little too stand-off in my approach, but you can't fault me for that." Ves shrugged. "I'm wearing the hat of a head designer right now, so there's a limit to the extent I can mingle with the rank-and-file. Besides, the brass already told me that I'm heading out after this mission."

"Even if that is so, that is no excuse to pretend you live in a different orbit than us. Maybe the other mech regiments are stricter in that regard, but the Vandals are a bunch of exiles from wildly different backgrounds and origins. Everyone of us has screwed up at some point that caused the Mech Corps to punt us to this mech regiment. Without a shared identity to keep us together and trust in each other, how can we stay strong and united against our external foes?"

Ves took a deeper gulp of his drink. "I don't disagree with what you are saying. You Vandals have adopted an admirably casual and tolerant culture. It's

different from what my relatives have told me about the Mech Corps. If nothing else, I enjoyed my time here and have learned a lot from you guys."

"Heh. You're one of the strangest Larkinsons I've ever met. A mech designer from your family! And not only that, but one who's willing to play fast and loose. The Larkinsons I've served with in my previous postings would have wrung your neck out if they heard some of what you've been up to during your time with us!"

That caused him to turn his attention to her. "You've served with one of my uncles or aunts?"

"Sure! It's not as if I became a Vandal since the start. I used to roll with a landbound mech regiment called the 9th Colocis Grand Rollers during the previous war. They're the trump card regiment of the 3rd Bentheim Division. They've got lots of high-quality medium and heavy knight mechs and cannoneers. Their mechs, mech pilots, mech technicians and mech designers are some of the best of the Mech Corps."

Ves nodded. "I've heard some impressive stories about the Grand Rollers, but not a lot."

"That's because their mechs are so expensive and polished that the generals are reluctant to throw them into the meat grinder." She said contemptuously.

"The Grand Rollers have trained for years and decades for the sole purpose of breaking the lines of the Vesians, but because they have become so good at it, no commanding officer wants to be the one responsible for a defeat that results in losing tens of billions of credits worth of mechs."

"Well, if they're a trump card regiment, then it goes without saying that they should only be employed in the battles that matter."

"The Grand Rollers all understand that, but the lack of action grates on them. Do you know what it does to a mech pilot when they are sitting safely behind

the frontlines repeating the same simulation sessions over and over while their fellow soldiers are fighting and dying at the very forefront of the war?"

"Shouldn't their leaders be aware of their frustration?"

"Of course they do! Yet do they care? They have bigger concerns than placating some bored and overly restricted mech pilots! Part of what I hate about my time with the Grand Rollers is that they're so bound by rules and discipline that they can't vent their frustrations on anything!"

"Is that how you got in trouble?" Ves asked.

She snorted at him. "Nice try. My story is rather private, thank you very much. All you need to know is that I didn't get along well with the poisonous culture and the shortsighted officers whose only response to the mounting frustrations is to whip the men with punishments and pointless assignments."

Her reticence increased his curiosity. Ves became really curious how a good chief technician like Carletta Haine got exiled to a mech regiment like the Flagrant Vandals. He admired her competence and leadership ability, and she could have made for a good chief in any mech regiment.

The Vandals should be lucky she led the mech technicians aboard the Shield of Hispania.

"What were the other Larkinsons like? I don't recall any of my relatives serving with the Grand Rollers, but there are too many of us to count."

"I didn't serve with the Grand Rollers from the start. I learned the ropes in various other mech regiments, bouncing around from unit to unit until I received an enviable promotion to the elite Colocis Grand Rollers. Feh. Don't believe the hype when it comes to elite mech regiments. The more the Mech Corps invests in them, the more the mech regiment gets treated like a trophy instead of the tool."

"It sounds as if you prefer to be with a mech regiment that gets treated like disposable tools."

"Hah! Guilty as charged!" She laughed. "I think there's something refreshing how disdainful headquarters treat the Flagrant Vandals. The brass doesn't bother to ply us with fake niceties because we're not worth the effort to them. Everyone Vandal knows the score. That allows us to grow closer to each other due to our shared contempt at the officers who consider our existence to be a stain. Tools we may be, but at least we are doing something useful instead of looking pretty!"

Ves understood the underlying frustrations of what she described with the Grand Rollers.

Ever since the genetic aptitude of potentates became clear to them at the age of ten, they trained all their lives to become mech pilots. Aftering attending several mech academies for twelve to fifteen years, they became eager to prove their worth!

What a shock it would be for these talented mech pilots who ended up in a prestigious mech regiment to be put on the sidelines for most of the war. From what Ves had learned of the previous war, it had been one of the more deadlier and serious wars between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom.

Under such dire circumstances, the power and determination of the Colocis Grand Rollers may have helped stemmed the bloodshed and slaughter on the side of the Bright Republic. The conflict grew so heated during the previous generation that many veterans who rose up during that war were regarded with a bit more reverence in the Bright Republic today.

It had also scarred an entire generation of freshly-graduated young mech pilots who experienced war for the first time. His father had been one of them,

and ever since then he tried to seek peace and tranquility whenever he could on Cloudy Curtain.

"Besides," Chief Haine added as she finished her drink. "There's one more benefit to rolling with the Vandals."

"And what's that?"

"We get to rob and pillage the Vesians to our heart's content, even outside of wartime." She chuckled maliciously. "It may not seem like it right now, but we spent most of our time planning and conducting raids on Vesian trade convoys and border systems. It's always a blast to pay them back for the suffering they inflicted on the Bright Republic!"

Chapter 745 A Dynamic Greeting

The Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet transitioned out of FTL in the star system suspected to be one jump away from the suspected coordinates of the Starlight Megalodon.

How did they know that?

Under the dim light of the brown dwarf in the center of this forgettable star system, the carcasses of both mechs and starships drifted in every direction. Several debris fields filled with hundreds of mechs and dozens of ships bore the marks of intensive battle.

The Vandals identified the distinctive profiles of several ships they previously observed. For example, a converted carrier from the NIN mixed up in one debris field, while in another debris field several starships from the Caged and the Red Tongs kept the other wrecks company.

All of these wrecks indicated that every participating force started to converge to a single point in space. It made a lot of sense for other outfits to choose this star system as a stopping point.

The second clue came from the incidental starships that have sustained severe battle damage and drifted so far away to the point where their fellow comrades abandoned them. Certainly, it would have made more sense to save them or at least recover their crew and cargo.

Yet if it came to some cheap converted carrier that was already falling apart anyway, then the pirate gangs who snapped them up on the cheap really didn't care about recovering anything from them. They would rather save the extra hours and make the fateful jump to the Starlight Megalodon!

This not only applied to entire ships, but also from mech pilots who ejected their cockpits or crew members who boarded their escape pods!

Stranded, helpless and left behind, the survivors did everything to save their lives. The ship crews utilized whatever mechs or shuttles they had to stop their uncontrolled coasting in space and tow their ships towards anyone that could help.

The people stuck in their cockpits enjoyed no such luck. They broadcasted the facts and their calls for help in open space for anyone to listen.

Sometimes, a surviving pirate gang picked them up, only to enslave them or torture them for fun. Others simply fired their weapons at them or smashed them into pieces by driving their ships straight through the free-floating escape pods.

The final clue that told the Flagrant Swordmaidens that they had almost reached their target was the ambush that fell upon them seconds after emergence.

"CONTACT! Sir, our near-range sensors are detecting incoming space mines!"

"Hostile signatures detected within one light-second of our fleet! The signatures match the profiles of both ships and mechs in three different

formations! An estimated number of four-hundred spaceborn mechs are inbound!"

Four-hundred mechs! Those numbers were enough to threaten the Flagrant Vandals even if most of them consisted of bargain bin mechs!

"Sensors have detected a large swarm of fast-moving signatures! They've just been identified as missiles! At their current acceleration profile, they will impact our fleet in three minutes and forty seconds!"

A mass of reports and alerts sounded out as the Flagrant Swordmaidens immediately entered hot water. Due to the recent transition, the sensors and several sensitive systems of their ships and mechs still needed time to recover and adjust to the material dimensions.

During this limited window of time where the fleet was at its weakest and most vulnerable, the helmsmen of the combat carriers all tried to orient their vessels so that the strongest side faced the incoming attacks. The combat carriers also contracted their formation so that their armored bulk could cover for their flimsier logistics ships.

A series of rumbles shuddered throughout the Shield of Hispania! The mines previously laying dormant in the minefield began to pelt the combat carriers with their payloads!

"Damage report!"

"Our armor belt is holding up, sir! The payload of the mines are weak! They've never been designed to take out a decently armored ship!"

Ves nodded in agreement. Light mines like these would have wreaked carnage among a fleet of light carriers or converted carriers along with their accompanying transports. Basically, that sounded like the average pirate or mercenary fleet.

Too bad their ambushers attacked the wrong force. While the Swordmaidens endured the bombardment a lot worse than the Vandals due to their smaller numbers and lack of combat carriers, Major Verle only hesitated for a moment before commanding Captain Rakeshir to move the fleet to partially cover the beleaguered Swordmaidens.

This also had the effect of putting the Vandal ships at the mercy of the Swordmaidens.

In the middle of an attack, neither of them couldn't afford any hesitation in making their decisions! When it came down to it, the Vandals were willing to extend their trust to the Swordmaidens!

The Swordmaidens for their part didn't initiate any shenanigans. They deployed their meager lineup of spaceborn ranged mechs first in order to intercept the mines. Fortunately, while most of their starships couldn't be called combat carriers, they heavily modified their cheaper vessels by piling up a lot of thick plating around their hulls. This provided them with enough of a buffer to form a response!

After a few minutes had passed, the sensors and systems of the Flagrant Swordmaidens fully recovered by now. Akkara mechs that had been stationed beforehand in their bunkers started unleashing their prodigious firepower at the incoming mines with a high degree of accuracy.

The missile volley proved a bit more difficult to intercept! Unlike the large and lumbering mines, the missiles all entered into an agile evasion pattern at the final phase of their flight!

"Prioritize the interception of the incoming missile volley!"

Over half of the Akkara cannoneers shifted their firepower from the mines to the closing missile swarm. Their counterfire largely consisted of dialed down

laser beam bursts in an attempt to intercept as many missiles as possible without excessively overheating their laser cannon mounts.

An interesting detail was that the Akkara mechs actually cheated a little when it came to managing their overall heat. As they hunkered down in the bunkers built into the sides of the combat carriers, a lot of their surface area touched the hull structure of the vessels. This direct connection siphoned away a huge amount of heat from the smaller mech to the humongous ship.

In effect, if the Akkara mech pilots maintain control over their fire rate, then they could essentially continue to fire without any concern for reaching their maximum heat capacity. The ship they connected to essentially acted as an enormous heat sink!

This was a huge advantage in spaceborn combat because venting heat was one of the biggest technical challenges in spaceborn mech combat!

Along with an abundant amount of energy and ammunition at hand, these Akkara mechs exemplified their role as turrets as they threw a prodigious storm of firepower against the incoming missile swarm.

Even though hundreds of them attempted to assail the ambushed Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet, none of them managed to survive at the halfway point!

"I need the identities of the parties attacking us! Who are we dealing with?!"

"Sir, we are having difficulty parsing the variety of pirate mechs and ships! Even the Swordmaiden database doesn't have entries for every ship we've managed to observe. From what we can tentatively gather, we are facing at least thirteen different small-scale pirate gangs, of which half only owns one carrier vessel!"

"Bottom feeders." Major Verle growl. "These vermin have messed with the wrong fleet. Prepare for a counter-attack as soon as the mines are cleared out!"

During the time the other officers and operators handled the immediate crisis, Ves and Ketis calmly performed their own duties in the background. The two tasked themselves with identifying the origin, providence and attributes of the mechs arrayed against them.

While Ketis managed to identify a couple of mechs from the top of her head, most of the motley mechs arrayed against the Flagrant Swordmaidens consisted of cheap salvaged junk. They were so inconsistent that Ves had no way of determining their original mech models through all of the sloppy 'accessories' and other junk the pirates tacked on!

Ves had to make a brief visual inspection in five seconds and quickly list out the most pertinent strengths and weaknesses that came to mind within the next five seconds.

Observe a new mech for five seconds.

List out its traits for five seconds.

Observe another ugly pirate mech for five seconds.

List out the new mech's traits for five seconds.

His quick, bot-like manner of analysing the mechs would be sent into the local database, which would corroborate his analyses with the ones performed by AIs and other experts. As Ves was a bona-fide mech designer who also happened to be the head designer, his analyses usually trumped the others, though the AIs usually managed to pick up something new due to their radically different thought processes.

All of this information became available to the mech pilots when they deployed into the field and faced off against one of the identified mechs. The wondrous part about the man-machine connection between a mech and their mech pilot was that they shared the best of both worlds. They combined a human's

ingenuity and spark of imagination with the raw analytical and calculative ability of a machine.

In essence, the effect enhanced a mech pilot's judgement and responsiveness to that of a human implanted with an AI chip or a biocomputer. The difference was that the machine half of this union transcended a mere chip or computer.

Nonetheless, despite these fundamental differences, the fact remained that they became partially capable of reading and internalizing a large amount of data than a normal human possibly could withstand.

This advantage or mutation to be more precise could bear the load of so much data that some people even believe that potentates were destined to be the next evolutionary step of humanity!

In short, this amazing capacity to internalize a large amount of sensory, mechanical and external data inputs and process them in an extremely efficient way became the signature ability of modern mech pilots. How else could they exert fine control over a massive multi-ton mech the size of a structure that ran millions of different processes at the same time?

Ves recently gained a new appreciation of their information processing ability after witnessing the sick Redemption Duel held by the Church of Haatumak. Even as their nerves withstood tens if not hundreds of times the routine input of a mech, Acolytes Gien and Evie still managed to persevere and exert a limited amount of control.

Compared to the flood of data that poured into those poor acolytes, the minute amount of data that consisted of his analysis was nothing to be concerned about. The mech pilots would easily be able to process his analyses and subconsciously adjust their fighting methods to take advantage of their opponent's weak points while avoiding their strong points.

"The mine field is almost expended, sir! Only fifteen percent of the original mine field remains!"

"Redirect all Akkaras to target our opponent's motherships! Put pressure on the vessels even if they are out of optimal range of our cannons! I don't believe these cowardly pirates are so united that they are willing to ignore the threat to their own rides home."

Major Verle's orders caused the heavy mechs to turn their firepower towards the distant carriers that hovered at the periphery of the battle. While the kinetic and ballistic rounds from the Akkara mechs had a hard time hitting the moving vessels, the laser cannons proved to be more accurate as they seared long rents into the cheap junk-grade armor of the ramshackle carriers fielded by the pirates.

The combat carriers of the Vandals actually sustained quite a large amount of accumulated damage, but their thick and superior armor plating prevented them from affecting the hull structure. Mostly. A few errant compartments blew out due to successive impacts at the same armor section.

"Sir! The enemy mech swarms are faltering in their charge! A number of them are pulling back to their sieged carriers!"

The Akkara mechs barely bombarded the pirate carriers for more than a minute, but already the damage began to tell. The fact that the pirates already started splitting up due the resilience shown by the Flagrant Swordmaidens signified that they weren't under a strong unified command!

The Vandals had grasped their weakest aspect! Four-hundred incoming mechs quickly became three-hundred attacking mechs as at least a hundred of them had second thoughts.

"Let's split these pirates even further." Major Verle grinned.

Chapter 746 Bottom Feeders

Three distinct grouping of miscellaneous pirate vessels made up from many different gangs all decided to ambush the fleet that came out of the transition entry zone from the nearest dimmest star.

They even pulled out all the stops somehow by planting a minefield in the vague area around the entry zone!

This was a luxurious amount of treatment to any random pirate gang that blundered into this small brown dwarf star system, yet this time the pirates had definitely kicked an iron sheet!

The seasoned Vandals depended on two distinctive advantage to weather the storm.

First, their combat carriers may not be able to match up against the vessels of an elite mech regiment, but they certainly withstood anything the pirates could throw at them for a couple of minutes!

Second, their absolutely devastating heavy mechs projected an enormous amount of concentrated firepower at a fairly long range and passable accuracy. The storm of firepower harassed the motherships of the incoming waves of pirate mechs and had already caused a fourth of them to change their mind and turn tail!

"Send the following units to attack the smallest group of bogeys approaching from our starboard side." Major Verle ordered as he drafted the movement orders in the air with his armored fingers.

The plot projected in front of his command chair responded to his intentions by coloring the affected formations and depicting a bold arrow that thrust right at the heart of one of the three loose swarms of pirate mechs.

"The mech captains have acknowledged their orders. They are moving into action. Our other mechs are holding position."

"Inform the Swordmaidens of our latest maneuvers and invite them to join our assault. We need to make the strongest impact as we can in order to achieve the greatest effect."

The Vandals didn't even ask and the Swordmaidens already followed suit. At least two-thirds of their Misty Slashers already trailed after the Vandal offensive.

Both sides sent out their melee mechs to charge straight towards the heart of the smallest group of mechs, which consisted of sixty or so pirate mechs of dubious quality. Since the incoming response from the Flagrant Swordmaidens outnumbered them by more than two-to-one, the pirates immediately lost heart in their offensive and tried to turn tail.

Too late!

The ultrafast Inheritors zipped through their swarm which had built up too much forward momentum to turn back in time. The Inheritors avoided any risky moves but spent most of their efforts on hindering the pirates from escaping and corraling them from the flanks so they wouldn't split up.

The Misty Slashers arrived next as their minibooters gave them a considerable push in acceleration. This allowed them to arrive just after the Inheritors and wail into the panicking and disintegrating pirate mech swarm. Their group had never shown much coordination beyond charging forward in the same direction, and it showed how every pirate mech fended for themselves against the enormous threat of the Misty Slasher's sharp and heavy swords!

More than ten pirate frontline mechs instantly fell as they possessed no means of defending themselves against melee attacks. The knight mechs and the other pirate mechs that ought to have defended them were busy worrying about themselves!

"Amateurs." Ketis shook her head. "I know exactly what's going on. These pirates here are the leftovers of all the other outfits that have reached up to this point. Who knows how they got here in the first place. They probably followed after the trails of one of the bigger outfits. I'm guessing that the stronger gangs must have had enough of the freeloaders and intimidating them into staying put here."

"So the pirates that are too scared to jump forward lingered in this star system for a while and eventually decided to band together?"

"Yeah. They formed a temporary alliance solely for the purpose of combining their strength against a prey they are reasonably sure are coming at a specific entry zone. I bet there's no real leader or someone with enough fame to command their attention. They're as loose as a pack of rats!"

Like rats, they fell apart easily when the cats came out to hunt. The smallest group of pirate mechs already started to disintegrate after coming under the attack of the Inheritors and the Misty Slashers.

The arrival of the Hellcats smashed them into pieces. The Hellcat hybrid knights didn't even waste their missiles against these trash. They merely fired a single volley of their nail drivers to unbalance their targets before smashing into them with their shields!

Sixty pirate mechs quickly got wiped out with only negligible losses for the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

The reckless fighting style actually caused some overreaching Misty Slashers to sustain heavy damage to the point where two of their pilots had to eject, but that was the extent of their downed mechs.

The other two pirate mech groupings faltered as one of their own got wiped out so fast. They had reached the perimeter of the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet but couldn't go any further as the defensive lineup of the Vandals and the

Swordmaidens resolutely barred their way towards the valuable ships of the allied fleet!

As the Inheritors, Misty Slashers and Hellcats turned around and left behind a debris field of broken pirate mechs, the stoppered pirates started losing more and more heart in this ill-conceived assault.

They already threw a bunch of mines and missiles at the Flagrant Swordmaidens, but their supposed prey sustained no substantial damage. Their fighting capabilities were just as awful as the pirates made no headway at all into threatening the combat carriers before the Vandal Inheritors raced into their midst!

The pirates already saw what happened to their last colleagues. The remaining pirate mechs that stuck around all lost heart and attempted to run away!

This time, their determination to flee was so great that the Inheritors couldn't possibly hinder the escape of hundreds of pirate mechs. They managed to entangle some of the unlucky pirate mechs, which subsequently got sliced into pieces by the Misty Slashers that approached them from the flanks.

Around fifty more pirate mechs met their end within ten minutes of chaotic fighting and fleeing!

Though hundreds of pirate mechs successfully managed to disengage, the Flagrant Swordmaidens managed to smash their spirits so thoroughly that they only thought about running.

They picked the wrong force to ambush!

"Our mech captains wishes to pursue. The Misty Slashers are already racing to run down the stragglers. What are your orders, sir?"

"Halt pursuit. Rein in our melee mechs and have our Akkaras and our other ranged mechs focus down the pirate carriers. Inform the Swordmaidens of our intentions and advise them to pull back their swordsman mechs before they overreach. Eliminating these pirates won't benefit us as much as our possible rivals. Let these bottom feeders scurry back to their holes. We have bigger fish to fry."

Slowly, some order emerged out of the chaotic outburst of combat that began right at the start of their emergence in this star system. Small debris fields already drifted away from the victorious Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Once the remnant pirate alliances dissolved into individual outfits and vessels and split away from each other, the battle finally came to an end.

A couple of search and rescue teams emerged from the ships and started to police the battlefield, prioritizing haste over thoroughness. There wasn't much to salvage from the debris fields anyway, considering most mechs consisted of junk to begin with. The mechs needed to be at least ten times more valuable to start becoming interesting to the discerning salvage connoisseurs of the Vandals.

"The bottom feeders have left, but different insects are about to descend upon the carcasses." Ves remarked.

"What do you expect?" Ketis snorted. "You're letting hundreds of thousands of K-coins worth of salvage drift away. Which pirate would be crazy enough to let them drift off into deep space?"

Of course, one man's trash was another man's treasure. The uninvolved pirates that hung around the periphery already to approach the direction where the debris field drifted to. Since the Flagrant Swordmaidens showed little interest in the junk, the neutral pirates already started feeling bold and

approached the furthest reaches of the debris field to begin picking up some bargains.

While the pirates gave in to their scavenging instincts, the search and rescue teams focused on retrieving the ejected cockpits of any of their allies, of which there was mercifully few. They actually spent most of their efforts on capturing the mech pilots stranded inside ejected cockpits of pirate mechs.

The complete rout by the pirate forces left them with very little opportunity to rescue their stranded comrades, which the Vandals ruthlessly took advantage of by capturing scores of prisoners!

In the meantime, the Swordmaidens and the Vandals each took stock of the local situation. This dim star system that was situated so far into the deep frontier hosted a surprising amount of uninvolved people.

It signified a serious breach in the confidentiality of the race to salvage the treasures of the Starlight Megalodon! The CFA might be informed even now and prepared to send out a warfleet possibly!

"Who brought all of these dummies here?" Major Verle grumbled before he barked at his subordinates to hasten the interrogation of their captives. They needed to know as soon as possible where these riff raff came from and what they were after. "And throw the pirates out of the airlock once you're done with them! These scum deserve nothing less and I don't want crowd our brig with useless lowlives!"

Early interrogations already started from the moment the surviving mech pilots got dragged into the shuttles of the Vandals. Through a mixture of coercion and intoxication, an incoherent set of intelligence poured in. They told them less than they liked.

"Most of these pirates have indeed followed the trail of larger fleets, but they don't know what lays ahead. Furthermore, they lack the navigational key that

will allow them to jump towards where the other major fleets have gone ahead."

Interrogating the prisoners further about which forces they saw painted a small list of all stars the Flagrant Swordmaidens needed to pay attention to. None of the forces mentioned possessed a simple background.

A small list of outfits and alliances spread among the crew.

"Well, we already know about the Caged and their recent team up with the red Tongs." Ves said as he perused the list. Most of the outfits mentioned in the list held no meaning to Ves. He never heard of these outlandishly named groups before. "Fortunately, there aren't any military units among the listed groups. We can beat the pirates as long as they don't unite."

Due to the navigational restriction required to dial-in the coordinates of the Starlight Megalodon, only five different outfits or alliances actually made the jump. That didn't preclude latecomers from joining in at the party at a later date, but for now these five groupings became the focal point of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Major Verle summoned the officers for another conference meeting in an hour. It should be the final one before they made the jump themselves, because the longer they lingered at the gates, the longer they remained vulnerable to another bottom feeder assault.

It took a few more hours for the FTL drives of their supply train to finish cycling. Those slow transports and cargo haulers that carried all of their essential supplies had pretty much slowed them down from the start, allowing the other participants of the game to overtake their progress.

Still, the Vandals remained unconcerned as the extra supplies gave them a lot more depth and lasting power in a long campaign, which the Vandals possessed a lot of familiarity with. Most pirates on the other hand had a

tendency to neglect logistics, with the excuse that they could always raid the supplies of another force if they ran out of stuff.

This also happened to make the supply train a juicy target to pirates.

Chapter 747 Spacetime Anomaly

An hour before the final briefing, Ves dug through the logs of the previous battle. The pirate ambush may have been repelled, but the space mines inflicted serious damage to the armor belts of their combat carriers. Just because their ships could take them didn't mean they liked to get hurt.

Various engineers formed up work crews composed of ship technicians and other ratings in order to assist with the emergency patchups of the worst armor breaches. They pulled out various pre-prepared alloys from the cargo holds that molded easy into shape and possessed enough resilience to act as stopgap armor.

"Huh." He said. "That's interesting."

"What is it?" Ketis looked over at his console.

"Venerable Xie deployed into action. He took the Parallax Star for a spin."

Footage of the Parallax Star in action showed the Parallax Star inconspicuously trying to blend in with the Hellcats, though it mostly failed at that because the expert mech appeared too flashy to be mistaken for anything else

Still, Venerable Xie avoided utilizing any flashy resonance abilities so the modified lancer mech only showed an elevated level of performance compared to veteran mech pilots.

"The Venerable likely wanted to test his actual performance with the Parallax Star." Ketis pointed out. "Since the simulators are so poor in modeling his piloting ability, only a real battle can show whether he has the chops to pilot the lancer mech."

Ves also surmised this was the case, as the Parallax Star moved rather jerkily in some instances, as if Venerable Xie tried and failed to perform a complicated move. Overall, the Parallax Star appeared to be a poor fit for the expert pilot. He was like a kid trying to make an adult-sized suit of exoskeleton armor to work. The expert mech simply demanded too much out of the weaker expert.

"We've already anticipated this outcome, but the results are worse than I feared." Ves spoke. While Venerable Xie increased his mastery over the difficult lancer mech, it never quite ran smoothly. "Expert mechs are always intricate machines that are designed to be piloted by one specific individual. The higher the degree of fit, the less the mech is compatible with other mech pilots, particularly ones that don't resemble the original pilot at all. Specialization is a strength as well as a weakness when it comes to expert mechs."

He pulled up some of the telemetry of the mech in combat, though it didn't tell him much because he hadn't dove into designing expert mechs yet. The telemetry of an expert mech diverged so drastically from normal mechs that they should be considered as two separate species.

He wrote a quick report about the Parallax Star's performance and added on the advice that the mech would continue to perform poorly unless Venerable Xie suddenly grew stronger, which wouldn't be happening anytime soon.

He expected the expert pilot's performance with the Pale Dancer to be a lot better than his attempt to make the Parallax Star work for him. After all, unlike the spaceborn lancer mech, the landbound rifleman mech at least had the benefit of fitting to Venerable Xie like a glove.

Of course, once the Vandals finally got out of this mess, they should scrap and replace the Pale Dancer as soon as possible with a new machine designed in-house. As much as the Pale Dancer seemed like a convenient

gift, who knew how much the Senior retained by the Royal House of Talk tampered with some of its functions.

Almost an hour later, a bunch of armored men and women entered the conference room. The mood among the Vandal officers and chiefs appeared grim.

While they feared what lay ahead, they all accepted the importance of their duties. The Starlight Megalodon beckoned, and if they couldn't secure its bounty, then the pirates would do so instead, allowing them to gain a massive boost of strength!

Even if this mission had nothing to do with the war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom, they still intended to do their duty.

Ves sat next to Chief Avanaeon and Chief Haine. All of the people from the technical and support department sat on one side of the compartment while the mech officers and security officers stood on the other side.

Once the hatch to the conference room became locked, Major Verle stepped to the center and drew everyone's attention.

"Good work on repelling the pirate ambush, everyone. None of us panicked or faltered when we transitioned out of FTL in the middle of a minefield, and everyone kept their eyes focused on their tasks. We all need to be level-headed and focused on the job when we emerge at the suspected coordinates of the Starlight Megalodon."

Everyone felt good at the major's praise. Their commanding officer rarely offered them so openly, so the praise lifted up the moods of Ves and the others. Some even broke out into a rare smile.

After a brief pause, the major turned on the projection and switched it to a localized star map of the deep frontier. A thin blue line zigged-zagged from

star system to star system, each of them notable for their relative dimness compared to the neighboring sandmen-occupied star systems.

The line halted at their current location. Up ahead lay a cloud of whirling uncertainty.

"This star system, whatever it is, has never been charted before. The CFA exploration charts does not depict the presence of any star system, rogue planet or any other kind of stellar object at these coordinates. This is extremely odd, as it is a bright trinary star system that centers around two yellow dwarfs and one red dwarf. With three suns in a single star system, it is impossible to overlook such an energetic location."

Chief Haine raised her hand. "How up to date are those exploration charts, sir?"

"The latest ones are half-a-century old. Not very current, I know, but stars don't have a tendency to pop up or wink out in such a short time-frame. In galactic terms, fifty years is as inconsequential as the blink of an eye."

Nobody could figure out where this star system came from and how it ended up in the middle of what should have been completely empty except for some errant dust, comets or gas clouds.

"Our gravitic detectors have detected anomalous readings from the star system temporary designated as the Aeon Corona System. The reason why we have given this star system this designation is because spacetime itself is rippling around these coordinates!"

That caused the crew to burst into concern.

"Now, our science officers along with our specialists in FTL travel have indicated that it is impossible for normal FTL drives to reach the Aeon Corona System. The spacetime phenomenon that surrounds the trinary star system effectively surrounds it in a permanent gravitic storm. Any ship that attempts

to drive through the turbulence will be swept off course and will likely end up lost or reach an entirely different star system many light-years away from the intended destination!"

"Then how do we reach this freaky star system, sir?" A security captain asked with a pensive face. All of this science stuff flew right over his head.

"We have a key." Chief Avanaeon spoke out after Verle gestured to him. "The spacetime storm looks random and uncontrolled, but the ebbs and waves actually follow an extremely complex set of mathematical patterns. It's frankly impossible for us to model the undulations and crack the code in less than a century, but we don't have to because we have already obtained the solutions. Using this data as our key, we can program in our FTL drives with a highly-customized configuration that will allow us to slip through the cracks of the spacetime storm and reach the Aeon Corona System without our ships getting battered aside."

All of this sounded discomfiting to the rest of the Vandals. While Avanaeon tried his best to dumb down the explanation so that normal people understood the overall principles behind the science, his analogy painted a hazardous journey where one misstep might lead their ship to oblivion!

A bridge officer raised her hand. "Chief, does that mean without this key, no one else will be able to tool their FTL drives in the right way?"

"Yes. The key is safe in our hands. As soon as the FTL drives of our supply train has finished cycling, we can immediately use the key to input the right settings for our upcoming FTL transition. Once we do that, we will be committed to entering the heart of the storm. Do note that it is highly likely that we also need this key to exit the Aeon Corona System. Those same gravitic waves can easily batter us back into the system if we attempt to make it out without going through the same cracks as we initially entered."

A worrying silence fell over the conference room. As they began to contemplate the implications of this key, Ves slowly began to grow more alarmed.

How long would it be until the FTL drives of their slower ships finished cycling?

How many of these keys still existed outside of the Aeon Corona System?

An ominous possibility flitted in his mind, and his paranoia screamed at him that the uninvited guests might make their play soon!

After all, if the objective of the Church of Haatumak was to piggy-back off the Flagrant Swordmaidens all the way to the Starlight Megalodon, then they needed to take the key for themselves before it went out of their reach!

His heart pumped faster as his fingers started itching. He had programmed a series of preplanned actions into his suit of combat armor. He also made some preparations during his time at the Gorgon's Gaze when Acolyte Willis didn't dare to be present in the same compartment as Venerable Xie.

Now would be the time to see if the Vandals believed his warnings. He didn't wish to pull the trigger at this moment, but time waited for no one!

He forcibly tried to present a calm facade which belied the fear and excitement that sprung up from his heart. He slowly raised his hand, moving far too slow for his like. After Major Verle answered someone else's question, the man turned his attention to Ves.

"Yes, Mr. Larkinson?"

"I'd like to declare a code 835."

Half of the occupants in the room jerked up at the mention of this strange number. The other half looked confused at the ones who recognized this code.

"Are you certain?" Major Verle's eyes suddenly bore into Ves. "The damage will be severe if you are proven wrong. So far, we failed to observe any evidence to support your declaration."

Despite the Major's skeptical words, Ves knew that the covert warning he sent from the Gorgon's Gaze had convinced the Vandals!

"I'll take full responsibility if I'm wrong."

"Very well." Major Verle nodded, then switched his projection to display the combat footage of the Parallax Star in action. "Let us discuss the the battle performance of our new expert pilot. Some of you were right to doubt him, as the Parallax Star failed to live up to its promises in his hands. Commence countermeasures to a code 835 situation."

Verle spoke those last words in a measured cadence that did not fall out of place from his previous sentences. Yet what happened next made it obvious that those words were anything but normal!

All of the oxygen immediately sucked out of the conference room. The sudden loss of air caused everyone's hazard or combat suits to fold out their helmets and enclose their wearers in an airtight seal to protect them against the sudden vacuum!

Only half a second after the air began sucking out, the artificial gravity started reversing so that the ceiling became the deck and the deck became the ceiling!

Fortunately, the suits worn by the Vandals automatically responded to this next emergency by activating their emergency magnetic modules built into the soles of their boots and greaves. This caused them to hang upside-down, disorienting those who hadn't anticipated such an action while only briefly inconveniencing those who already knew this would happen!

Half the Vandals who expected this to happen drew out their pistols from their holsters. Ves drew out his ballistic handgun as well, though he much preferred to materialize the Amastendira.

Code 835 had been declared!

Chapter 748 Code 835

At the same time the strange proceedings happened, Ves channeled a large amount of spiritual energy that he reserved in his mind to his eyesight.

A fog swept up the confusing confines of the conference room. Throughout the haze that resembled a mist, the clear forms of seven acolytes from the Church of Haatumak lay crunched against the ceiling-turned-deck!

Even if their forms seemed intangible and untouchable, they still had to be bound by the rules of physics! If gravity didn't affect their forms, they would find it a lot harder to move around the ship! They hadn't expected gravity to reverse and the air to be sucked away!

Regretfully, the acolytes all wore vacsuits that automatically enveloped their heads in an airtight seal, protecting them from the sudden deprivation of air.

Ves couldn't afford to stare all day. He activated his jamming device, causing the entire airless compartment to buzz and become charged with energy.

This blocked any form of electronic communication and many other devices, preventing the recovering acolytes from sending out a message through these means!

Due to the lack of air in the conference room, nobody would be able to hear each other in the open air. All of the occupants automatically joined a local communications channel, which but to their consternation, the jamming device filled the channel with static!

Ves knew that with the acolytes maintaining their invisible state despite their sudden crash, those who prepared for the code 835 would begin to grow skeptical. He needed to make his move now!

He raised his arm and allowed his spiritually-charged eyes to track his gun to Acolyte Villis, who rested on the ceiling right above his head.

Bloodmist splattered over his combat armor as his ballistic round hit the old woman straight in her center mass!

Not only did the others become alarmed at the sight of evaporating bloodmist, but the ceiling suddenly became host to a robed figure garbed in a vacsuit clutching the gaping wound in her stomach! The vacsuit automatically closed the gaps from the round that bore through the formerly invisible lady's stomach, but Ves fired again, this time managing to bore another round through the old lady's head!

Dead!

That wasn't all. Though a lot of the Vandals expressed skepticism to the decision to declare a code 835, the acolyte's suddenly-visible corpse finally managed to make them come around to the fact that hidden infiltrators lived in their midst!

Even though the jamming device scrambled all communication channels, the Vandals still possessed other means of communication. Major Verle stretched out an arm and shaped his armored fingers in a specific shape.

This silent hand gesture immediately caused the Vandals armed with energy weapons to fire them indiscriminately at the ceiling-turned-deck at low power settings. The sustained laser beams emanating from their pistols raked across the ceiling eventually hitting some of the acolytes and causing them to pop to visibility.

Those armed with ballistic weapons immediately peppered them with a torrent of projectiles!

However, not every acolyte went down without a fight. Those who became aware that they had been exposed began to fight back!

They did not appear to employ any weapons for some reason, but instead they stretched out their hands towards the upside-down Vandals who stuck themselves in place with their magnetic boots and greaves and pushed out a strange purple energy wave that caused the Vandals in the way to lose their consciousness and fall!

What was that?! That energy wave passed straight through everyone's armor as if they didn't exist!

The counterattack merely spurred the armed Vandals on! They directed their full firepower into taking out the acolytes in short order. The locked compartment left no room for them to run!

Ves kept his high-powered jamming device active even after the last acolyte succumbed to the lasers and bullets that turned his body into a smoking sieve. The robes and vacsuits may have facilitated their ability to stay out of sight, but it offered them little protection against attacks!

Major Verle performed a series of hand gestures that Ves unfortunately couldn't interpret. The mech officer noticed that and projected a small text from his helmet into the air.

[TURN OFF THE JAMMER.]

That was risky. If Ves turned off his gadget, the acolytes hiding elsewhere might get wind of the deaths of their colleagues. They would know the game was up!

Yet Ves had no power to decide how to respond to this outcome. He could only place his hopes on the Vandals and pray they responded quickly enough to neutralize the other uninvited guests.

As Ves reluctantly deactivated his jamming device, Major Verle performed a quick series of actions.

First, he turned gravity back to normal and let air return to the conference room. Second, he issued a fleet-wide command at the highest priority, announcing that a code 835 was in effect. Third, he fired off a quick message to the Swordmaidens to warn them of the same threats, though whether they listened or not Ves wasn't sure.

"Sweep the fleet of these infiltrators! Get to your stations and prepare for retaliation!"

The entire Vandal fleet entered the highest level of alertness. Alarms rang like crazy and red lights flashed ominously over everyone's heads. The code 835 declaration caused the ship captains and mech officers to use similar tricks to catch any possible infiltrators.

Yet somehow the acolytes stationed on the other vessels received a separate signal at the exact same time! Just as the Vandal officers aboard the other ships began to employ a response against the code 835, the acolytes moved faster! Each of them employed their strange energy attacks that struck the commanding officers of the other ships!

Reports of ambush attacks and assassinations already started pouring in! The only upside was that the other combat carriers only hosted two or three uninvited guests at most. The Shield of Hispania warranted a lot more acolytes due to her role as the flagship of the fleet. If the cultists managed to take out the staff officers, then the coordination and cohesion of the fleet would suffer a massive hit!

As Ves raced towards the command center and plopped himself to his seat, security officers drummed in every direction and started inspecting each corridor and compartment with handheld scanners, dust sprayers and other methods of stealth detection.

Personally, Ves figured they already took out all of the acolytes assigned to the Shield of Hispania. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the rest of the Vandals and Swordmaiden vessels!

Casualties mounted when the alerted acolytes struck the first blow on the other vessels!

"Casualties are mounting, sir! We have confirmed the deaths of six ship captains, twelve mech officers, two security captains, four chief technicians and five chief engineers!"

"Damn!" Major Verle slammed his fist against his armrest. "They hesitated too much!"

For some reason, the worshippers of Haatumak skipped over mech designers entirely, prioritizing the deaths of chief technicians over any mech designer but Ves.

He felt rather insulted for his profession. Did the cultists regard mech designers as useless?!

"Wounded?"

"Over sixty wounded officers and chiefs are being tended to, sir. All of them have suffered various degrees of neurological damage, but the docs estimate they can make a full recovery within two weeks of intensive treatment."

"That's still too much!"

Too many Vandal officers hadn't been diligent in memorizing the contingency codes. Code 835 was one of many possible emergency situations listed out in

a disaster manual of the Mech Corps. The military truly thought about almost anything, considering that the unclassified portion of the disaster manual already exceeded over a thousand different codes!

While the rank-and-file weren't expected to memorize the codes by heart as they would simply be informed of their meaning when the commanding officer declared an emergency, the officers and chiefs should have known better!

Now that the acolytes succeeded in assassinating their primary targets, they attempted to avoid retaliation as best as they could in order to sow more chaos!

"Sir, severe cases of sabotage has been detected on the Ascendant, the Finmoth Regal and the Linever Swan! Their FTL drives blew apart and their power reactor's containment has been damaged! The surviving engineers have immediately initiated emergency shutdowns for their sips. All three ships are dead in space!"

More bad news! Two important combat carriers and one extremely vital logistics ship turned from functional starships into vulnerable metal prisons!

"Assign three combat carriers to cover one ship each! Inform the rest to standby and deploy their spaceborn mechs to cover against a possible pirate attack!"

"Sir, Captain Rakeshir informs us that the Antecedent's power reactor is reaching critical levels! Their chief engineer is dead and their remaining engineers all suffered severe wounds in their attempts to put down the chief engineer's assassin! He intends to give the order to abandon ship!"

Major Verle grimaced even more. Even if their most senior ship captain managed to survive, the crisis had reached such a dire level at the Antecedent that they were about to write off a precious combat carrier!

"Reply with an acknowledgement and tell him that he has full discretion over the matter!"

While the Vandals buckled and heaved due to this crisis, the Swordmaidens suffered comparably worse! Three of their vessels already started sputtering and faltering as large heat signatures emanated from their engineering bays. Escape pods and hastily launched mechs escaped the doomed carriers as fast as they could. If not for the abundant amount of safety mechanisms built into even the cheaper models of power reactors, the Swordmaidens would never have enough time to complete their evacuation!

Even then, the predominant evacuees consisted of the female Swordmaidens. As for their male enslaved technical personnel, they weren't allowed to flee before every other Swordmaiden made it out!

By the time the three precious Swordmaiden carriers blew up, hundreds of slaves and scores of Swordmaidens failed to make it out in time!

Perhaps the only consolation was that their pirate allies actually lost less officers and chiefs than the Vandals. Not only had the Church of Haatumak assigned fewer acolytes to stalk the Swordmaidens, but Commander Lydia and most of their senior officers possessed extremely good battle reflexes! Their robust, genetically modified bodies also managed to withstand the energy wave attacks, causing them to fall into a temporary coma instead of becoming permanently brain dead!

Ves started to harbor some suspicions about the strange mode of attack. He understood why the acolytes didn't carry any weapons. Their light garments and lack of equipment facilitated their stealth. Yet where did the energy wave attacks come from?

After he listened to the reports that poured in from the other ships, he suddenly found that the others hadn't detected any purple waves. Those

struck by the attacks never saw them coming, and witnesses stated that they all saw the officers and chiefs collapse like a puppet whose strings were cut!

"Is it my vision?"

Ves realized that he had only been able to see the energy waves due to his spiritual vision!

The implications dawned on him. The Church of Haatumak and by extension the Five Scrolls Compact managed to find a way to weaponize spirituality!

The only good news was that once the acolytes unleashed their energy wave attacks, they lost all of their accumulation. They couldn't attack again and possessed no other weapons. Even if they picked up the pistols of the fallen officers, the weapons were biometrically locked to their owners.

The only way the acolytes could do more damage was to activate their hidden bombs and lead the Flagrant Vandals in a merry chase.

"Keep hunting down the rats! Scour our ships from top to bottom at least thrice! Don't let any of these infiltrators alive!"

Still, the loss of the Antecedent, the crippling of two more vital starships and the death of so many leaders among the Flagrant Vandals definitely set them back a lot!

As for Lydia's Swordmaidens, while they mostly managed to chop or shoot the acolytes apart before they could inflict too many casualties, the loss of three entire carriers impacted them hugely as they experienced an acute shortage of ships!

While both sides had been able to launch their spaceborn mechs or threw out their landbound mechs into space in a hurry, all of those mechs lost their motherships and became homeless!

Without a ship to berth in, The Vandals and Swordmaidens wouldn't be able to bring these homeless mechs to the Aeon Corona System. They urgently needed to obtain more ships!

Major Verle already started studying the local plot. While all of the pirate vessels drawn to the debris field noted the strange setbacks suffered by the Vandals and the Swordmaidens, they mostly returned to looting the debris field without a care.

"Time to grab some new ships." He muttered.

Chapter 749 Low Priority Targe

Through a heroic effort by the engineers on hand, they managed to save both the Linever Swan and the Finmoth Regal. The logistics ship and combat carrier respectfully both played vital roles that couldn't easily be replaced if lost.

Unfortunately, the engineers at the Antecedent hadn't been able to pull back the venerable combat carrier from her doom. The acolytes of Haatumak demolished their ranks so severely that the ones who survived and managed to stay conscious lacked a deep understanding of power reactors.

Remote assistance or transferring chief engineers from other ships to the flailing Antecedent only resulted in delaying her inevitable violent death. If the chief engineer of the Antecedent had reacted immediately to mitigate the sabotage, then the ship could have been saved like the Finmoth Regal and the Linever Swan. Unfortunately, the chief engineer died right at the start of the crisis.

The displacement of so many crew, mechs and whatever supplies they managed to evacuate in time needed to be stashed somewhere else. For now, the other ships temporarily took in the excess, but they had to sacrifice precious space reserved for securing the spaceborn mechs currently deployed in great numbers around the fleet.

They needed to throw as much mechs in space not just to deter the neutral pirates from taking advantage of their temporary disarray, but also to clear up more space!

This couldn't go on. The Swordmaidens had it worse because they lost three whole carriers due to sabotage. While the acolytes who ambushed the Swordmaidens mostly got chopped apart before they could kill too many of their officers, their engineers were obviously less adept, as they mostly failed to fix the sabotage done to the power reactors of their starships.

The Swordmaidens either employed enslaved men as engineers or female combat fanatics that mostly earned their engineering chops by following free lessons on the galactic net. The difference between a pirate engineer and a military-trained engineer was like night and day!

If the Church of Haatumak stationed more acolytes on the Swordmaiden vessels, then they could have probably crippled their entire fleet!

Sadly, they rightfully regarded the Flagrant Vandals as the greater threat, and prioritized eliminating their key officers and chiefs at a critical moment. The esoteric stealth methods of their acolytes likely gave the cultists boundless confidence in their ability to defeat the Flagrant Swordmaidens in a single blow before they departed for the Aeon Corona System with the all-important key in tow.

Of course, the other Vandals also began to figure out that the acolytes had been placed aboard their ships as a supplementary attack to the main threat!

"The Temple of Haatumak and her swarm of pirate escorts must be on their way right now." Major Verle concluded with a grim face. Everyone felt the pressure. "We need to move fast! Capture the marked-out pirate vessels and load in our mechs and supplies. Start using the key and configure our FTL drives for the jump to the Aeon Corona System."

"Yes, sir!"

"Major, our Swordmaiden allies report that some of their ships have lost their FTL drives! They will need at least half a day to rig up their spares!"

"That's too slow! One of our chief engineers to each ship that requires a replacement drive."

"Sir, we lost five chief engineers during the ambush! Almost all of our surviving and unwounded chief engineers are occupied with replacing the FTL drives for the Finmoth Regal and the Linever Swan!"

"Spare what we can. It matters little if we get our FTL drives up faster if the Swordmaidens can't keep up. We have traveled too far to abandon our comrades now."

The sensor officer spoke up then. "The pirate ships have ceased their salvage attempts, sir. They are attempting to flee from our approach!"

The pirate scavengers always remained skittish as they attempted to loot the spoils of the Flagrant Swordmaidens. According to custom, the salvage belonged to the victors, so the neutral pirates always maintained a wary posture in case the winners changed their mind.

Besides, the pirates constantly observed the movements of the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet. The sudden evacuation and collapse of four whole starships caught their attention instantly.

They knew the implications of floating in the vicinity of a force with too many mechs and too little ships. Such a force would immediately seek to steal someone else's ships!

So they made the logical decision and ran!

"Hehe. Look at these fat tubs run! They'll never be able to get anywhere!"

The independent pirate vessels mostly consisted of cheap and dubiously shipworthy converted carriers. The Vandals and the Swordmaidens each possessed more discerning tastes, so they outright ignored these ramshackle ships that began their lives as cargo haulers and moved on to the slightly more upscale light carriers.

Despite being called light, this quality only referred to their relative place among the carrier classes. Compared to the beefier combat carriers or the capital ship-sized fleet carriers, the light carriers formed one of the favorite mech carrying starships for the serious mercenary or pirate commander.

Although the pirates as a rule never took great care of their ships, the Flagrant Swordmaidens weren't spoiled for choice. While the light carriers out-accelerated converted carriers by a wide margin, they couldn't outrun the Inheritors and the Misty Slashers! Ships may have the advantage in terms of reach, but in shorter distances the superior acceleration of mechs trumped the sluggish vessels which needed a long time to get going.

Neither Ves nor Verle nor any other Vandal or Swordmaiden expressed any concern about the success of their mechs. The pirate scavengers all spread out and claimed their own little territory across the debris field. They also didn't trust each other, so they would never united and face a common threat.

Their low-quality mechs, their low-skilled mech pilots, their inferior numbers, their low morale and complete lack of coordination all resulted in a complete collapse within minutes of contact.

The Inheritor light skirmishers developed an intuitive cooperation with the Misty Slasher swordsman mechs. While the Inheritors distracted the pirate mechs and hemmed them in, the Misty Slashers collapsed on the bewildered pirates and cut them into ribbons!

In most cases, the Hellcat hybrid knights arrived too late to contribute to the battle.

With the pirate mechs taken care of, the crew of the vulnerable light carriers mostly began to evacuate their doomed ship or tried to sabotage as much as they could. Boarding shuttles sent by the Swordmaidens arrived quickly enough to secure the engineering bay and the bridge, preventing the pirates from destroying the precious light carriers.

Due to the haste behind their actions, the Swordmaiden boarding parties suffered slight casualties due to carelessness, but they had no choice. They needed to secure the light carriers as fast as possible!

Due to the bloody battles, the Swordmaidens weren't feeling very generous. They killed every pirate who lingered aboard the ships, not even sparing the slaves that surrendered instantly. Even if they could use more crew to man their ships, the Swordmaidens couldn't afford to trust these dubious prisoners.

Blood flowed like rivers aboard the captured light carriers!

"Major, incoming message from Commander Lydia! The Swordmaidens report they've secured four pirate light carriers from their former owners. They have presented one of them for our use!"

"Did they gift us the best or worst light carrier?"

The worst, as she turned out. The Swordmaidens kept the best-maintained and least undamaged ships for their own uses. No matter. As long as their new carrier flew and didn't leak too much air, they could work with that. While her sublight propulsion and FTL drive sustained some damage during her capture, the Vandal overstretched engineers would make her work somehow.

As Ves witnessed the Vandals putting out a number of fires, it became clear to everyone that their well-oiled machine started creaking. The temporary or

permanent absences of more than eighty officers, chiefs and other vital personnel gummed up their response times.

Too many mech lieutenants filled the shoes of their fallen mech captains, while the same applied to ship captains, chief technicians and chief engineers. The loss of just five chief engineers hurt the Vandals incredibly badly right now because their expertise was sorely needed to resolve the damage to their ships.

While the loss of leaders seriously affected the smooth running of the task force, Ves worried about the longer-term issues as well. "The loss of an veteran mech captain hurts as much as losing an entire mech company, while the loss of a chief engineer is equivalent to losing several hundred ship ratings. Our overall efficiency will be seriously affected from this moment out."

Due to their special recruitment conditions, the Flagrant Vandals had an abundance of bad apples but very few true talents. Cases like Chief Haine who had been exiled to the Vandals despite her strong ability proved to be the exception rather than the rule.

Most Vandals in fact resembled types like Captain Orfan, who should have never been promoted in a position of leadership were it not for the overall lack of qualified alternatives.

All the field promotions and temporary elevation of positions resulted in a lot of garbage being shoved up the hierarchy!

"Ketis, how are the Swordmaidens doing?"

"Bad." She replied, mourning the losses her fellow sisters suffered. "Those bastard backstabbing cultists blew up three of our ships!"

The Swordmaidens suffered hugely from losing so many ships at once. Even if they appropriated three new light carriers, it took a lot of time to repair the

battle damage, remove all the boobytraps and make sure no survivors made it past their sweeps.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens had reached their weakest point since the start of their journey into the frontier!

In the meantime, Ves became interested in the autopsies of the acolytes and how they managed to kill or incapacitate their targets with nothing but a wave of their hand.

They had definitely mastered a way of employing spirituality offensively! Having experienced its lethal effects up close, he'd be lying if he said he held no interest in copying their methods.

The trouble was that while Ves had been credited with exposing the acolytes, the autopsies and the footage of the attacks remained strictly in the hands of the security department. When he begged Major Verle for access, the irate and overstressed commanding officer curtly shot him down.

"Mr. Larkinson, while I may have given you certain liberties, that does not mean you are in charge of the Flagrant Vandals. Colonel Lowenfield you are not. Return to your duties and leave the investigation up to the experts."

Ves inwardly snorted. The security officers had completely dropped the ball with regard to the cultist infiltrators. The freaky invisible acolytes hid among their very own for well over a month without at risk of detection!

If he hadn't tipped the Vandals off by looking up the code 835 and discreetly sending out a warning to Major Verle from the Gorgon's Gaze, then the Vandals would have lost more than one ship!

Still, Verle had a point. Due to all of the shuffling and confusion, Ves had a lot of work on his plate. "Yes, sir. I'll return to my duties."

Ves had a headache when it came to managing the aftermath of the partially successful ambush. The sudden loss of a number of critical chief technicians that kept their department together had left a lot of mech technicians listless and without effective leadership!

The average caliber of mech technicians among these leaderless Vandals did not instill Ves with much confidence. The Vandal officers aboard the affected ships may have field-promoted the most senior mech technicians among their bunch, but these fellows mostly consisted of cynical old salts. They resembled the old grandpas and grandmas who held a very dim view of authority, and only became competent with working with mechs due to sheer repetition.

In terms of leadership and technical ability, these so-called acting chief technicians couldn't match even a fourth of the capabilities of their predecessors!

All of this showed as the overall productivity of the maintenance departments instantly plunged. Mechs that needed servicing didn't get serviced while mechs that cried out for repairs received the wrong mech technicians who didn't specialize in repairing the specific damaged components.

"It's time for my mech designers to get off their lazy butts. Useless, eh? Not worth assassinating, eh? I'll show those acolytes that mech designers are worth something!"

Chapter 750 Another Crisis

As everyone in the command center of the Shield of Hispania constantly put out the fires as they came, Major Verle suddenly received a priority message. The commanding officer took one look at it before he instantly discolored.

He quietly cursed and jumped out of his command seat.

"Maintain your duties and keep the fleet from falling apart."

The latest crisis must be a really huge one if the big man himself had to depart from his command seat. The Flagrant Vandals could still manage without him, but his constant presence and his measured confidence had done much to disperse the confusion and stabilize their flagging morale.

Right now, the Swordmaidens and the Vandals each focused a large amount of their efforts into breaking in their newly-captured light carriers they liberated from their previous owners.

Of course, pirates being what they were, practically all four carriers were cesspools of filth, junk and other unpleasant goods. Cleaning up the compartments and throwing away the junk into space took much longer than they thought. This was in addition to the expansive inspection of all of their systems.

The Boiled Duck, the unflattering name for the light carrier handed over to them by the Swordmaidens after they killed the original crew, hid a large number of boobytraps. They already caused some of the Swordmaidens some grief when they took over the ship, and they became an enduring headache for the security officers slowly sweeping them up and defusing their deadly mechanisms.

Ketis didn't look surprised. "Every decent pirate captain boobytraps their own ships to hell and back. It's standard procedure out here where every large pirate gang won't hesitate to take over your ship if you're alone. Filling up your ship with traps will at least make others hesitate in trying to take over your baby."

"How come you Swordmaidens easily managed to board and take over the light carriers?"

"We're very good in boarding combat." She grinned. "Our swords are sharp enough to bore through the thinner bulkhead sections that allows us to

circumvent choke points entirely. Besides, those pirates aren't very well geared in the first place. At least half of them likely aren't wearing anything heavier than a hazard suit. The captains don't want their underlings to be too well-armed, you see. They might think they're strong enough to demand a greater share, or force a change in leadership."

Ves scoffed at that. "I don't envy pirate captains. Even their own crew are constantly suspect in their eyes. It's a wonder they can remain afloat under those conditions."

Half an hour went by as they returned to their individual duties. He tasked Ketis with cataloguing and profiling the pirate mechs still in space in case they ever launched an attack, while he himself started to manage the other mech designers. They needed to be more proactive in order to avoid the mech technicians from sinking into an abyss due to the elevation of incompetent mech technicians to chiefs.

He encountered a lot of obstacles while doing so, as most mech designers simply didn't have what it took to take on a leadership role.

Still, if they didn't step up, then who would be able to serve as a check against some of the idiotic decisions the new chiefs had already started issuing?

Almost every ship and every department dealt with the consequences of losing so many experienced Vandal leaders. Their only consolation was that many of the wounded would see a full recovery in the next couple of weeks.

Yet even this absence hurt the Vandals a lot as the mission had reached a critical moment. It was like showing up to a mech arena match with three out of five star athletes taken out of commission because they boarded a shuttle while drunk and crashed it into an ocean.

The reserve athletes who replaced the incapacitated mech pilots couldn't measure up to the original lineup. It would be good enough if they exhibited half the skill of the original star athletes!

"This is going to result in a lot of screwups down the line." He muttered.

Just as Ves went back to riding herd over his mech designers who appeared unable to show any initiative during a crisis, he received a high-priority alert on his comm.

"What? Major Verle wants me to come down to the infirmary?"

Did he change his mind about granting Ves permission to inspect the corpses of the acolytes? Probably not, since the security officers likely inspected them at their own department. The message also explicitly summoned him with urgency, so he doubted it had anything to do with an autopsy.

"Stay put." He instructed Ketis. "I'm being called elsewhere. If I'm delayed for any reason, I'll tell you what to do."

"Okay, teacher."

"You don't have to call me teacher anymore. You've graduated from my instruction. You can call me Ves if you like." He smiled.

"Really? That seems rather disrespectful.. Mayra always told me you civilized folk like to keep it stiff and formal."

"That's with strangers. We're long past that stage. Besides, Brighters aren't as stiff as the Vesians and many other states. None of the Vandals will turn up their noses if you call me by my first name."

"Okay then, Ves!" She chirped.

As Ves navigated through the corridors of the Shield of Hispania, he walked past many busy work crews in full gear. Security officers in bulky exoskeleton

armor swept the corridors with a variety of means, forcing Ves and the other Vandals to press themselves against the bulkheads to go past their ranks.

A strong undercurrent of concern spread among the crew. The Vandals all anticipated the imminent arrival of either the Temple of Haatumak and her many pirate escorts or some other force that worked on their behalf.

The Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet herefore tried to boost as far away from the emergence zone as possible. Any force that followed their exact same route would likely transition out of FTL within that zone and be in easy engagement range to the allied fleet if nothing changed.

Even then, the recently conquered light carriers and the sabotaged Finmoth Regal and the Linever Swan slowed them all down. A chain was only as strong as its weakest link, and the crippled combat carrier and logistics ship needed to be towed by other vessels in order to get a move on.

Everyone thought their flight was too slow. Towing the big, fat Linever Swan especially strained the Vandals as three whole combat carriers lent their propulsion power to get her going.

As Ves finally reached the infirmary, he nodded to the doctors and nurses taking care of the wounded who managed to survive the strange attack method of the acolytes and walked over to an isolated ward of some sorts.

The heavily-armed security officers standing guard outside the entrance was new. Unlike the other Vandals in armor, these fellows kept their helmets folded over their heads to shield their entire bodies from harm.

They must be guarding something critically important inside.

"Mr. Larkinson? Major Verle is expecting you inside. Please relinquish every device and weapon in your possession. They will be returned to you when you exit."

Ves acquiesced to the demand. It wasn't as if the security officers looked like they accepted any excuses from him. Though he felt reluctant to part with his two expensive gadgets again, he trusted the guards to keep them safe.

He didn't feel so bad about handing over his military-issued comm and his ballistic handgun. They were just tools that Ves used for convenience. Unlike his personal gadgets, he never designed or crafted them by hand, so he lacked an emotional connection to these devices.

Surprisingly, the security officer handed him back his signal jammer after performing a cursory inspection. "You're allowed to carry this inside."

Once the security officers swept him one more time, the hatch finally opened up and allowed him entry. Stepping inside, he appeared to have entered some kind of long-term recovery ward for senior officers or very important people.

The dominantly white compartment and sparse but tasteful furniture made out of high-quality materials provided the best environment for someone to recover from a severe affliction.

Ves stepped over to Major Verle, who looked down upon a frail-looking figure resting inside a sophisticated medical pod. Its semi-transparent upper surface showed the patient to be in a bad condition, as discolorations and bindings covered half of the poor man's body. They even removed his hair!

"I've received your summons, sir. Where am I needed?"

The mech officer idly gestured at Ves. "Come closer and look down on this patient. Do you recognize him?"

Ves did so and peered through the transparent cover. He frowned. "He looks familiar, but the discolorations and bandages make it hard for me to recall. Who is he, sir?"

"You should have recognized him. This man is the current Fourth Prince of the Royal House of Talk, the ruling dynasty of the Palast Kingdom which is a third-rate state of the Dark Plasma Star Sector. He is also the former leader of the ill-fated Shining Stars Colonization Fleet and the former patron and employer of Venerable Karol Xie."

"What, sir?! This is Prince Hixt-Klaaster!? How did he end up like this?!"

The exiled prince previously appeared a little haggard, but very much healthy and in the prime of his life. To see him reduced to a skinny state with visible and invisible wounds marring over half of his body, Ves wondered how he ended up like this! Shouldn't he be under strict guard?!

"The Acolytes may have failed to take out our command staff aboard the Shield of Hispania, but they have succeeded in a range of smaller sabotage attempts." Major Verle stoically explained. "One of their attempts targeted the hidden and highly-guarded compartment where we stowed away the Fourth Prince."

"Why do his wounds look so strange, sir?"

"As far as we are aware of, he has been struck by the same type of attack employed by all the other Acolytes."

"That.." Ves frowned even deeper. "Doesn't that mean we didn't kill all of the cultists aboard the Shield at the conference meeting, sir? Have the security officers guarding the Fourth Prince at least taken out that Acolyte?"

"Unfortunately, they hadn't been able to act fast enough. By the time we sent out the alert for a code 835 situation, the Acolyte already struck the prince and fled immediately. So far, we have not caught a single trace of this remaining infiltrator. We have quietly suspended all shuttle transfers and limited our mech deployments to keep him bottled up on our ship, but I do not have much faith in our chances to capture this invisible interloper."

When Ves heard about the remaining Acolyte at large, a chill ran down through his spine. They still hadn't swept up all of the uninvited guests! Even one single survivor could do a lot of damage at a critical moment!

"What are our countermeasures, sir?"

"Every important officer or chief needs to wear the heaviest suit of combat armor at all times. While armor has proven to be largely ineffective at preventing their silent and invisible attack method, they do not appear to be able to repeat the same feat in quick succession, so it will at least guard our officers against mundane weaponry. I will assign two security officers to tail each of our officers and chiefs, you included. We cannot afford to lose any of our cadre."

Hopefully, the remaining Acolyte would be cornered in time, though Ves doubted it. Someone invisible could go anywhere and the checkpoints the security officers setup may not be sufficient for the task.

Ves knew that the best way for the Acolyte to escape a combat carrier was to infiltrate one of the hangar bays and stow away aboard a mech with a roomier cockpit. Though that left the Acolyte with the problem of getting somewhere offboard, at least they only had to deal with a single mech pilot instead of the full complement of the Shield of Hispania.

"If I may make a suggestion, sir, I'd advise you to double or triple check the cockpits of each mechs that are about to deploy."

"We have already taken that possibility into account. No one is allowed to smuggle themselves out by hitchhiking on a deploying mech."