

### Chapter 881 Fiery Hearts

A fatalistic mood overtook the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens. Both of them knew that the Vesians wouldn't spare any of them even if they laid down their weapons and surrendered. The only way they could survive was to eke out a victory.

Therefore, even if everyone's morale was awful, they burned with the willingness to battle. They wanted to chop as much Vesian mechs as possible to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat!

Lydia's Swordmaidens possessed firm wills that would never be shaken so easily. They faced worse odds and managed to overturn the situation around. As long as they fought to their heart's content, what was there for them to regret?!

At the very least, the Swordmaidens would still live on without Commander Lydia and the landbound forces. While Lydia's Swordmaidens may no longer be called by that name upon the death of their founder, their sisters would still be able to rise up from the ashes.

Therefore, the Swordmaidens trapped on the surface needed to fight as hard as they could so they would not dishonor their names!

"Victory in battle! Glory in defeat!"

"The Swordmaidens shall live forever!"

"Death is not the end! Death is nothing to be afraid of! If death comes for us, then let us laugh in its face!"

The war cries thundering throughout the Swordmaiden side of the camp practically bowled over the Vandals. They could feel the grit and determination of the female warriors and couldn't help but be inspired by their unity and determination.

This was how mech pilots ought to behave!

The Vandals didn't want to let themselves be shown up by a bunch of frontier pirates. While fear still wracked their minds, they tried their best to push it back. If they must die, then they wanted to go kicking and screaming!

It was only when their backs were pressed against the wall that the Vandals truly acted with the demeanor of soldiers. The Vesians might have thought they managed to sap their wills, but instead they stoked them into a raging wildfire!

Even if the Vesians won in the end, they must absolutely suffer every step of the way!

Ves met with Captain Byrd, Chief Dakkon and Dr. Tillman to discuss the disposition of some of their most sensitive assets.

When they entered Captain Byrd's office, the mech officer prepared three high-capacity secure data chips for them. These data chips not only stored much more data than the cheaper varieties, they also possessed much stronger encryption as well. Regular hackers needed decades to crack the encryption through brute force.

Byrd gestured towards the data chips. "Please take the data chips and store them well. Each of them contains full logs of what has transpired in our expedition. The data chips also has plenty of room for you to fill up with any pertinent research data that you may feel the need to add."

"Why are you giving us these data chips?" Dakkon asked.

"In the event of a defeat, I want you to make a run for the Starlight Megalodon. The Vesians are cutting us off from entering the red zone right now, but in the event of a battle and defeat, they may lose too many mechs for them to be on guard against some small fry running away on foot. That is the best opportunity for some fish to slip through the net."

Everyone became depressed at the thought. What Captain Byrd actually suggested stood almost no chance of succeeding. Even if they ran past the encirclement of the Vesians, they still needed to traverse more than a hundred kilometers before they reached the safe zone around the Starlight Megalodon. The Vesians could easily track their footsteps and catch up to them before they made it far.

Therefore, what Captain Byrd suggested was extremely unlikely to come to pass. No one called her out for it because even a sliver of chance of success sustained this attempt.

As long as someone managed to slip away against overwhelming odds, the Flagrant Vandals and the Mech Corps gained valuable intelligence on what transpired on the ground. The authenticity of the logs wouldn't be called into question despite all the outlandish discoveries they made as long as no one tampered with the records.

Ves picked up the data chip first. Unlike the others, Miss Calabast already arranged his escape route. Therefore, he felt more assured that he could complete Captain Byrd's final request.

"I'll make sure this data chip falls in the right hand if I manage to survive and make it out of this planet." He pledged solemnly.

This was one promise he was determined to meet. The sacrifice of the Vandal ground forces shouldn't be in vain. Having witnessed how the Vandals climbed out of the pit of despair with fiery hearts, Ves couldn't help but get caught up in their fervor!

They were Vandals! They were servicemen! They were Brighters!

Rolling over to die was not in their blood!

Even when the Vandals faced imminent defeat, they still wanted to do what was best for the Bright Republic!

How could Ves not respect such patriotic determination? He felt helpless and powerless at his inability to turn the tide. He hated how little a mech designer's influence reached when it came to situations like this! If he possessed the battle prowess of an expert pilot, then at least he'd be able to fight on their behalf!

Yet his awful genetic aptitude precluded him from ever entering the cockpit as a mech pilot! Ves felt extraordinarily frustrated at his lack of combat capabilities. Even if he possessed the powerful Amastendira, the most he could do was shoot ten high-powered laser beams that might or might not be able to pierce through the armor of a light mech.

What then? He'd die as quick as that when a single mech retaliated against him. He'd either die from getting stepped upon by a melee mech or being vaporized out of existence when a ranged mech fired a laser at his position.

The boiling blood running through his veins urged him to fight back anyway. His pride and heritage as a Larkinson insisted upon it! How could a Larkinson hole themselves up in the rear and cower in the face of an enemy attack? How could a Larkinson think about abandoning their comrades and scurrying away from danger?

As Ves left Captain Byrd's office and returned to his office in order to load up the data chip with a bunch of research data from all of the research projects the Vandals conducted, he tried to reconcile his conflicting urges.

"I may be a Larkinson, but I'm not a warrior." He muttered. "I have no place on the battlefield. My presence makes no difference."

Ves inadvertently reminded himself of Eric Kichiro, the mech designer of Chopra Security Services and one of the few surviving Choprans the fleet picked up from a debris field in space.

The mech designer survived by being one of the first Choprans to abandon ship and eject from his escape pod.

He still remembered the phrase uttered by Eric.

"Cowardice is a virtue!"

Of course, Eric subsequently died a coward's death. A Chopran mech captain sneaked into his holding cell and executed the mech designer.

Did Eric deserve his death?

"He definitely had it coming. His early flight set off a premature evacuation and practically ruined the Chopran's chances of winning against the NIN that stabbed them in the back."

Yet if Ves fled the Vandals, would he be committing the same sin as Eric?

Ves didn't think so. First, the situation on the ground was a lot different than in space. A few people on foot trying to flee wasn't as conspicuous as a bunch of escape pods emerging from a ship.

Second, Captain Byrd already tacitly consented to such behavior when she passed over the high-capacity data chips. In fact, she even hoped that some of them might successfully flee. The Vandals on the ground must not be forgotten. All of their deeds and actions needed to be returned to the Bright Republic so that their sacrifice could be honored.

Third, Ves did not plan to flee too early in the battle. Captain Byrd spoke correctly when she said that nothing could sneak past the Vesian blockade at their full strength. Perhaps the means arranged by Miss Calabast might be an exception, but even then their chances of success became much greater if they fled at a time the Vesians incurred the maximum amount of losses possible.

"Cowardice is not a virtue." Ves concluded as he finished stuffing the data chip with all the research data he found valuable enough to carry away.

"Cowardice is a sin."

To flee from battle was a natural tendency. To fear death and value your own life was as human as it got. Yet Eric's actions accelerated the downfall of the Choprans.

Ves decided not to flee before the battle became decided.

After Ves finished stowing away the high-capacity data chip in a secure slot in his Earth Ant, he spent some time to prepare some supplies. Aware that he couldn't bring too much, he mostly limited himself to carrying nutrient packs, water, a medical kit, batteries and some extra tools.

The nutrient packs contained enough calories to keep him alive for a very long time. As the ultimate survival food the galaxy, they were jam-packed with nutrition and Ves could easily stretch out his supply for quite a long time if he went on a starvation diet.

On the other hand, he carried much less water, but his Earth Ant already contained an integrated water purifier. As long as it remained working, it could easily recycle his urine as well as filter any water source he found in the wild.

Even though the astral winds covered the entire horizon, the ecosystem still supported rain, and plenty of rivers and lakes dotted the lands. The only difference from a typical terrestrial planet was that Seven predominantly consisted of land.

After Ves finished preparing his pack of gear, Ves decided to pay a visit to Mayra. He walked over the the Swordmaiden side of the camp and became inspired by the way the Swordmaidens pumped themselves up for battle.

Even if the Vandals resolved to fight to the death, they couldn't help but exhibit some fear.

It was different for the Swordmaidens. Their warriors and mech pilots underwent an extensive amount of brutal training. All of their cowards already died or left the sisterhood. The only ones who remained successfully hunted an exobeast in the wild with nothing but their own bodies and a sword.

Swordmaidens capable of succeeding in their graduation ceremony no longer showed fear. They even thought the Vandals might have exaggerated the threat posed by the Vesians. They still believed they stood a good chance of winning.

Ves entered a familiar workshop and met with Mayra. "I have something important to say. Please call up Ketis."

Shortly afterwards, they entered a small office. Once Ves activated his signal jammer, he began to broach the topic of escape.

"I've come into contact with a third party." He revealed. "I've made a private arrangement with that person. In the event of a defeat, the third party is willing to sneak me to the safe zone around the Starlight Megalodon and save me from Vesian pursuit. I managed to negotiate the right to bring along an extra."

The pirate designers frowned. Ketis still remained a little confused, but Mayra's eyes grew sharp. The news that a third party might be staring at the Flagrant Swordmaidens and Vesians particularly caught her attention!

"Is this supposed third-party trustworthy in anyway?"

"No." Ves admitted. "I don't even know who she really is or who she works for. However, I think she's sincere enough because she needs my cooperation with certain matters. The point is that I may have a way of giving Ketis a way out."

"Hey!" Ketis growled. "If anyone's getting away, it should be Mayra! The Swordmaidens in the fleet still need her! I know my worth! I'm a nobody right now."

Mayra immediately cut in, causing Ketis to halt. "Absolutely not. In no way will I allow this opportunity to fall on anyone else but you. Although the offer from Ves sounds dubious, if anyone among us deserves an out, it should be you!"

"But why?!"

"Because I'm old, and you're young!"

Ves stood by the side, not wanting to intervene. He felt touched by their selflessness and willingness to sacrifice themselves.

Ketis thought of the good Mayra could still do. As a Journeyman Mech Designer, she could absolutely reinvigorate the surviving Swordmaidens.

As for Mayra, she considered Ketis to be her own adoptive daughter. A parent should never put their own lives over their children. Her sense of motherhood towards her protege compelled her to give Ketis the opportunity to escape and start a new life.

Because for Mayra, she loved Ketis more than she loved the Swordmaidens.

#### **Chapter 882 Difficult Dilemma**

"You are worth more than the Swordmaidens!" Mayra shouted, trying to convince her recalcitrant protege that her sacrifice meant nothing. "I would not be able to live with myself if my survival comes at the expense of your life! I might as well commit suicide in that case!"

Ketis couldn't accept that argument. "But what about the Swordmaidens?! Our sisters still need your help to rebuild the sisterhood!"

"We have sacrificed enough for the Swordmaidens." Mayra sneered, revealing her disillusion for the organization she served for several decades.

"Commander Lydia abandoned all she has built in order to be at the beck and call of a figure in the shadows. Our entire sisterhood is built upon a lie! We aren't giving women in the frontier a better chance. All this time, we've been training them to become a hidden tool to some rich and powerful magnate



from civilized space! Open your ears and listen to my words! Do you believe that I am talking nonsense?!"

Ketis wanted to refute with a fiery retort, yet she couldn't form a reply. Mayra told her much about the inner dealings of the Swordmaidens, including the existence of a secret backer who assisted Commander Lydia from the very start.

"This.. even if we answer to another boss, that still doesn't invalidate what the Swordmaidens have done!" She feebly responded. "We've upheld our ideals and become a force to be reckoned with in the frontier. Our dreams will die if you aren't there to help the sisters that we left behind in our fleet."

Mayra snorted. "Our other sisters will do just fine without out. They are my sisters as well, so I know they can take care of themselves. Besides, that hidden backer of ours won't discard their investment so easily. They'll be just fine even without a Journeyman Mech Designer presiding over their mechs."

"I can't believe you! How could you say that about the Swordmaidens!"

The shock exhibited by Ketis showed that she always put the Swordmaidens up to a high pedestal. To see Mayra throwing shade over the organization shattered all of her preconceptions. She respected Mayra immensely, but she loved the Swordmaidens with pure devotion.

To choose between the two tore her apart from the inside. Ketis couldn't handle the confrontation any longer and ran away as if her life depended on it! Rather than continuing to confront her dilemma, she'd rather flee from it entirely!

"She'll get around." Mayra sounded unapologetic for forcing her protege into this position. "She's not capable of abandoning the Swordmaidens yet, but I'll make sure she preserves her life."

"What about you?" Ves asked. "You should know the fate of any pirates that fall into the hands of someone like the Vesians."

Pirates rightfully received the penalty of death for their misdeeds. Even if people tended to throw around the label of pirates a bit too liberally, it didn't change that it was an absolute death sentence for any pirate to land in the hands of others.

It didn't matter if the pirate served as a non-combatant such as a cook. They contributed to the depravities of other pirates and thus were accomplices to the crime of piracy.

Civilized space detested space piracy to the core. Human civilization spread themselves out among the stars, to the point of engulfing half the galaxy. This was an immense amount of territory populated by trillions of people. Such a vast and mostly empty space could only be sustained if trade continued to flow between the stars.

Space pirates preying the trade channels formed the greatest threat against intersystem, interstate and intersector trade. States did everything possible to curb the tide of piracy that weakened their prosperity, and their mech militaries almost always abided by zero tolerance policies when it came to pirates.

"I'll try my luck with the Vesians." Mayra nonchalantly shrugged. She was already resigned to do so even without Ves offering a lifeline. "Even though pirate designers are worthy of death, I don't believe I've ever accrued a bounty. I'm different from the fugitive mech designers who committed heinous crimes and has been forced to flee to the frontier. I'm a complete unknown, and as a Journeyman Mech Designer, I am more valuable alive than dead."

Ves realized what kind of hope that represented. "You hope the Vesians will take a shine on your ability and use you for their own ends? The chance of

that happening is not high. If the Vesians back home know they employ a pirate designer, they'll catch a lot of flack."

"They'll have to keep me hidden and locked up in a secret base, then." She shrugged. "It's better than nothing. As long as I cooperate and lend my expertise to my captors, I'll be treated with respect. That's far better than being captured by pirates."

It still left a lot of question marks behind. Back when he studied mech design, Ves heard whispers about unscrupulous entities kidnapping mech designers and forcing them to work on shady projects at gunpoint.

Some mech designer students dismissed such stories as conspiracy theories. Ves initially took such rumors with a grain of salt, but with his experiences so far he knew better than to dismiss such stories.

Journeyman Mech Designers may not be as rare as expert pilots, but it took a considerable amount of effort to secure the services of one.

Novice Mech Designers were as numerous as the stars in the galaxy, while Apprentice Mech Designers flooded the labor market. It didn't take much effort to hire some average mech designers, though it was unlikely someone would be able to procure the services of talented Apprentices.

Those with actual ability already succeeded in running their own mech companies.

While good and bad Journeyman Mech Designers existed, even the worst of them could easily surpass some of the best Apprentices. Only extremely powerful organizations and mech militaries had the power, wealth and influence to employ them as large numbers. Some of them also continued to serve under Seniors and Masters in the hopes of advancing their learning.

Still, an overwhelming amount of Journeyman set up independent businesses. This was why procuring the services of even one Journeyman took quite a bit

of effort. Each one could easily worth billions of credits in the amount of value they offered through their services.

Simply put, someone like Mayra was pretty much a walking bag of money. Of course, it wouldn't be easy to squeeze this much value out of a mech designer, and it took a lot of time for the payoff to be worth the effort. However, a considerable amount of value could be gained over time. The more Ves thought about it, the more it sounded plausible to his ears.

Still, once Mayra fell into the hands of the Vesians, they would never let go.

"Are you prepared for what might be in store for you, Mayra? Your life may end in that secret base."

She smiled ruefully at Ves. "It is not the worst retirement I've heard. Pirates generally don't get to live old age. I think some peace and quiet while I get to pursue my craft without any outside concerns is rather attractive compared to roaming the frontier."

"I hope they'll treat you right when the time comes. I'll look for you after the war for Ketis' sake."

"Don't. Only trouble will come your way. Wait until either of you advance to Senior. Only then will you have the leverage to seek me out."

Ves respected her decision and her willingness to sacrifice everything for Ketis. As for advancing to Senior? Even if he felt confident about his chances of advancing quickly due to his advantages, it would still take a couple of decades for him to reach that height.

After he left Mayra's workshop, he returned to the Vandal side of the camp and joined the final preparations of the fight. Much of the camp had been boobytrapped or rigged to blow. The only reason why the Vandals and Swordmaidens hadn't ruined anything yet besides the Pale Dancer and some

other sensitive goods was because they still hoped they might prevail in the coming battle.

A couple of tense hours went by as the drums of war rang louder and louder. The Vesian scout mechs changed their patterns. Seismic sensors faintly detected large amount of heavy objects approaching the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

In order to prevent the camp from suffering any collateral damage, Commander Lydia and Captain Byrd decided to force the engagement a dozen kilometers from the camp. They brought most of their combat capable mechs to their chosen site, which granted them a small elevation and terrain advantage, and dare the Vesians into attacking their lines straight away.

A dozen kilometers was far enough that the camp and the supply train wouldn't be affected by collateral damage. The distance was also close enough for the main combat force to cover the camp in the event the Vesians wanted to circumvent them and hit their weakest point.

For a battle of this magnitude, the commanding officers didn't stay back this time to lead the troops from the rear.

Commander Lydia and Captain Byrd both decided to enter the fray in their mechs. Commander Lydia piloted a custom Silver Valencia, while Captain Byrd piloted a spare rifleman mech.

Ves took up his usual post inside the temporary command center. He could still contribute a lot to the battle by analysing the enemy mechs and pinpointing their weak points.

He had no intention of fleeing early like Eric Kichiro once did. As the head designer of the Vandals, Ves enjoyed a high position among the Vandals. Subsequently, he became subject to a lot of scrutiny. There would be hell to pay for him if he fled without good cause.

"Vandals, I won't lie to you. This will be a hard fight." Captain Byrd began her speech. Every Vandal listened to her projection no matter if they resided in a cockpit or stood by back in camp. "This will be the battle of our lives. The hatred between us and the Vesians is irreconcilable. They'll never let us go if we end up in their hands. Since we're already marked for death, we might as well take as much of their lives in the process! Because you know what? Because we are the Flagrant Vandals! We take what is ours!"

"We take what is ours!" Everyone echoed in unison. Even Ves joined in. "We take what is ours! We take what is ours!"

Captain Byrd's projection grinned. For the first time since he saw her, the mech captain actually looked inspiring. Ves figured that she specifically practiced for this speech beforehand. Someone else may have even written this speech for her as well.

"Since the founding of the Flagrant Vandals, we've been called pirates, we've been called scoundrels, we've been called scum who don't belong in the Mech Corps. Hah! We've fought and bled as much as any other mech regiment. We've seen our fair share of combat and do the dirty work that others aren't willing to do. The way I see it, our naysayers are right! We're thieves! We are stealers of lives, and right now hundreds of trained Vesian mech pilots are delivering their lives to our doorsteps!"

"Kill them!"

"Steal their lives!"

The Vandal mech pilots entered a state of utmost preparedness. All of their mechs had been checked by overworked mech technicians, and Ves spent as much time as he could to personally tune them up.

All of them waited for the Vesians to arrive. The seismic sensors continued to track the slow approach of an enormous mass of heavy footsteps.

The decisive battle loomed.

"They're coming."

According to the seismic sensors, the number of mechs approaching the main lines likely numbered around five-hundred.

They already outnumbered the Flagrant Swordmaidens by a small margin. While it still left the defenders with some hope for victory, Ves knew that quantity didn't count for everything.

### **Chapter 883 Set Piece Battle**

No more doubt plagued the Vandals and Swordmaidens. Now that the Vesians arrived at their doorsteps, the unruly mech pilots all calmed down.

In a battle for survival, doubt led to defeat!!

With roughly four to five-hundred mechs deployed on each side, the frontline stretched for kilometers. The temporary headquarters only managed to keep in touch with all of their mechs through the use of relays.

The environment imposed many restrictions on the battle. The interference in the air this close to the red zone hindered communications and discouraged both sides from spreading their mechs thin. It would be too easy to become isolated and cut off from backup.

The heavy gravity also complicated the fighting. The Flagrant Swordmaidens previously tore apart the Caged Tongs by surrounding their mechs and taking out their gravitic backpacks first. Without their personal antigrav fields, the afflicted mechs became forced to fight against six times normal gravity.

This practically crippled a mech's combat effectiveness!

Not only that, the high energy consumption of gravitic backpacks discouraged long, drawn-out engagements that typically happened when hundreds of mechs clashed against each other on land.

Most landbound engagements actually took place over multiple days. Battles in virtual games such as Iron Spirit didn't serve as an accurate example of how they were ordinarily fought because their endurance and supply situation were subject to artificial restrictions in order to hurry them up.

The main reason why the Vesians moved ahead with a frontal clash was because they couldn't sustain the enormous energy expenditure of lengthy medium-intensity battle. They would rather prefer to fight a quick high-intensity battle and end it quickly to prevent any accidents concerning their energy reserves!

"What a grand occasion." Ves remarked quietly as he saw the seismic sensors continuing to display a vague blob of heavy objects moving towards the prepared battle lines of the Vandals and Swordmaidens.

Neither side played any maneuvering games. The Flagrant Swordmaidens were forced to draw a line in the sand because of their duty to shield the camp and supply train. The Vesians deliberately attempted to cross that line because a straightforward confrontation suited their needs.

Thus, a rare occasion occurred where both sides willingly pushed for a set piece battle!

Such glorious battles regularly entered the annals of history. No matter if a side won or lost, as long as they fought at their best, the entire mech regiment received an immense amount of honor. Their performance would be turned into a glorious battle record and be added into the archives. and in turn enrich their martial tradition.

A mech regiment with a long list of battle records carried much more weight than a mech regiment with few notable battles to their name!



One of the hidden sources of inferiority to the Flagrant Vandals had always been their dearth of battle records. Small, inconsequential raids and trade interdiction didn't deserve to be turned into a battle record.

Only major engagements such as the Detemen Operation turned into a point of glory.

Ever since the Vandals embarked on their historic journey into the Vesia Kingdom, they continued to fight arduous battles that sacrificed many of their brothers and sisters.

Yet their sacrifice was not in vain! Not only did they accomplish their mission or survive time and time again, the battles also contributed to the elevation of the Flagrant Vandals.

No one would dismiss the Flagrant Vandals as the scum of the Mech Corps after the war. Every Vandal veteran could easily bring up honors they earned with their own flesh and blood. Some mech regiments wished they fought as frequently against the Vesians as the Flagrant Vandals!

"Look at our battle records! Tell me if we haven't fought as valiantly as the mech regiments in the frontline!"

Right now, many Vandal mech pilots fought not just for their own survival, but also to leave behind their legacy!

The Mech Corps always treated the descendents of fallen mech pilots generously. Those affected by the loss of a warrior received preferential treatment and subsidies. This was a way of motivating mech pilots to battle without fear and to sustain popular support for the war.

In fact, the Bright Republic only copied the Vesians in this manner. Vesian commoners generally didn't receive good treatment in their society, but it was wholly different once someone in their family became a mech pilot.

Any commoner could become a knight if they distinguished themselves in battle! This was also why the Vandals expected the Vesians to fight just as hard if not harder.

The Vesians held the upper hand, after all.

"The main force is coming into range."

"Hold your fire. We won't hit much at this range."

Due to the interference in the air, the effective range of laser weapons practically halved. There was no question about their power, but accuracy suffered a severe impact after a range of more than a couple of kilometers. Combined with the integrated ECM systems incorporated in any modern mech, perhaps only five to ten percent of laser beams landed on a mech.

Both sides expected the main battle to be decided in a melee clash. This suited the Swordmaidens just fine, as they always held utmost confidence in their mech swordsmanship.

For this reason, their main line consisted of Swordmaiden mechs. The Devil Razors and Silver Valencias were especially conspicuous. Mayra's designs all took the forefront and inspired the rest of the Swordmaidens into an unprecedented amount of battle lust.

This was a battle for the ages for the Swordmaidens!

As for the Flagrant Vandals, they positioned their mechs at the flanks and at the rear. Their mech roster was a mixed bag and lacked cohesion. However, this also granted them a lot of flexibility, and for this battle they decided to plug up the gaps the Swordmaidens couldn't fulfill.

Ves likened the deployment of the Flagrant Swordmaidens mechs as a strong fist surrounded by wings. It was the job of the fist to slam straight against the

enemy, thereby providing enough opportunities for the wings to cut the enemy from the flanks.

Therefore, the Swordmaiden mechs played the most critical role. The longer they held out against the Vesians, the larger the chances of cutting the Vesians apart!

The Meandering Monkeys began to flit back and forth at the edge of medium range. The Vandal and Swordmaiden ranged mechs itched to fire their lasers at the annoying light mechs that made their lives hell in the past week, but their commanding officers firmly held them back.

"The Meandering Monkey mechs are taunting us to fire at them. Their dodging patterns are too exquisite for us to hit them at this range. We'll only be draining our energy faster." Captain Byrd emphasized.

Even though the Vandals prepared a decent stockpile of batteries and energy cells, that didn't mean they could do whatever they wanted. They also faced some energy constraints.

"The vanguard of the Hostland Warriors are coming into view!"

Ves recognized some of the mech models of the Hostland Warriors from archival footage. However, the Bright Republic never paid much attention to the disposition of the Hafner Duchy. The territory's placement on the opposite side to the Vesia Kingdom meant that the Hafner mech legions rarely deployed against the Bright Republic.

Therefore, Ves spotted many new mech models. The Hostland Warriors resembled the Flagrant Vandals in that they didn't specialize in a narrow role. They fielded knight mechs, swordsman mechs, rifleman mechs, light skirmishers, striker mechs, frontline mechs and more.

They didn't field any heavy mechs, either because they didn't own any or because their energy budget couldn't sustain such an enormous burden.

Despite that, the battle lineup of the Hostland Warriors immediately made it clear that this was a mech regiment that could stand toe-to-toe against other frontline mech regiments!

"The reputation of the Hostland Warriors don't do them justice." Someone said. "They're fully geared for pitched battles."

The tragedy of the Hafner Duchy was that a mech regiment like the Hostland Warriors rarely had the opportunity to flex their muscles. They neighbored the Reinald Republic, a state that never formally declared war against the Vesians.

That didn't stop their unruly mech pilots to form completely unrelated pirate gangs and raid the Hafner territories. Most of the time, the Hostland Warriors split up their forces and took up garrison duty, waiting for an attack that almost never came due to the formidability of the Warriors in direct battles.

Therefore, the Hostland Warriors also looked forward to this coming battle. The Flagrant Vandals may not enjoy that good of a reputation among mech regiments, but they more than proved their valor against the Vesians in this latest war. Defeating the Vandals and their formidable-looking pirate allies would also earn the Warriors a lot of glory!

As more and more of the Hostland Warriors moved into range, neither side sent any envoys. A normal tradition in set piece battles was that both sides would send out envoys to parlay or champions to duel to the death.

Neither side felt the need to resort to such artificial traditions. This was a fight to the death. This deep into the storm lands and this close to the Starlight Megalodon, neither side could afford to let any of their adversaries escape.

The success of their missions hinged upon eliminating their greatest rivals on the surface of Aeon Corona VII!

Perhaps other pirate ground forces lingered in the vicinity. Even if any of them made it all the way to the red zone, the Flagrant Swordmaidens and Vesians doubted they retained much combat effectiveness.

Only they themselves were the kings of the battlefield. Yet this region was only big enough to support a single crown.

Neither side could abide each other's presence any longer!

In the end, Captain Byrd issued out the first command. "Akkara mechs, suppress the enemy battle line!"

The ten heavy cannoneers lessened the disparity in strength for the Flagrant Swordmaidens. They possessed an unimaginable amount of firepower, but could only play out their full advantages over time. The earlier they unloaded their firepower, the more the enemy suffered!

Therefore, Captain Byrd did not hesitate to employ the Akkara first! Their laser cannons possessed considerable range and their targeting systems were all top-notch. Their mech pilots all specialized in piloting both heavy mechs and ranged mechs and consisted of a rare group of elites among the Vandals.

Thick laser beams streaked across the battlefield with the speed of light and instantly scorched against the exterior of the enemy mechs.

At this range, a significant amount of laser beams hit their mark! The Hostland Warriors hadn't prepared to come under fire at this moment, so most of the stricken mechs had been slow to dodge to the side.

Detecting elevated heat signatures among the Hostland Warriors. They're firing back!

The Vesians quickly retaliated with hundreds of smaller laser beams. The Vandals and Swordmaidens already moved their mechs beforehand, causing fewer of them to be hit.

The battle commenced in earnest now!

"Ranged mechs, spread your wings!"

While the melee mechs slowly converged upon each other, the rifleman mechs from both sides started their dance with each other. Just like with the battle against the Caged Tongs, the duel between rifleman mechs played out like an elaborate dance.

It was like a magnified skirmish encompassing more than a hundred mechs on each side. The ranged mechs of the Hostland Warriors proved themselves to be remarkably skilled and solid in their marksmanship and dodging abilities.

The Vandal ranged mech pilots on the other hand each displayed an inconsistent amount of skill. Their backgrounds were too varied and most of them underwent their basic training outside of the Vandals.

Nonetheless, the varied means of the Vandal ranged mechs also prevented the Hostland Warriors from honing in on a specific weakness. The Vandal rifleman mechs each acted independently, but also stuck to a general strategy that could only clearly be seen from an overview.

The Vandal ranged mechs spread to the flanks and forced the Hostland Warriors to send their own ranged mechs in pursuit lest they leave their flanks open against ranged harassment.

The Vandal rifleman mechs successfully drew the bulk of the ranged mechs of the Hostland Warriors away from the Swordmaiden battle line!

"The rest is up to you now, Swordmaidens!"

### **Chapter 884 Frontal Collision**

Laser beams raked across both sides with radiant splendor. Without eye protection of eye augments, many people risked being blinded by the sheer amount of light being thrown around.

Fortunately, as laser weapons became more ubiquitous, every person in the galaxy received minor eye augments. This not only corrected their vision, but also added shielding to their retinas. This prevented them from being blinded when lasers started firing around.

Of course, not a single person on foot dared to be present at the battle right now. Only mechs fought against each other, and every mech pilot observed the battle through the sensors of their mechs rather than their naked eyes.

Even then, the brilliance of lasers overwhelmed some of the sensors and made it a bit more difficult to observe their foes.

Both the left flank and the right flank of the Flagrant Swordmaidens became engulfed in a torrent of laser fire with their opposite among the Vesians. The flanks stretched out as the rifleman mechs needed more room to maneuver.

Light mechs from both sides also started to dart back and forth. The Meandering Monkeys deftly attempted to close in, only to be deterred by vigilant Vandal rifleman mechs. However, this distraction reduced the pressure against the ranged mechs of the Hostland Warriors, allowing them to hit their targets with a little less concern.

The highly mobile clashes at the flanks resembled giant skirmishes. Due to the distance and the inherent damage potential of laser rifles, it would take a long time before a large amount of casualties emerged.

For now, the flanks remained at an equilibrium.

Neither side sent any further reinforcements to tip the balance of the scales. Instead, they devoted most of their efforts at the center.

"The Swordmaiden mech pilots are running out of patience!" A Vandal sitting behind a sensor console yelled. "They're about to surge forward!"

"Tell them to hold out longer! Let the enemy come to us!"

"It's no use! Even Commander Lydia can't keep her own Swordmaidens in line!"

Commander Lydia enjoyed a vast amount of respect from her subordinates, but the Swordmaidens had been trained to act decisively and ferociously when it came to battle. Even their founder's prestige failed to hold them back. This was the product of specific training! It turned the Swordmaidens into great berserkers but awful soldiers.

The Vandals commanding at the rear in the temporary headquarters all looked at each other in dismay. They already kept an eye on the Swordmaidens for this kind of behavior, but they couldn't believe these female pirates could be stubborn.

Captain Byrd patched in from her rifleman mech. As of now, she stuck to the main line instead of joining the other rifleman mechs at the flanks. She was much closer to the Swordmaiden mechs and thus knew exactly how little patience their allies had left.

"Switch to plan B. If the Swordmaidens are so eager to charge forward, then we should do everything to support them from the sides and rear. Prepare to move out!"

"Yes, captain!"

The Vandals learned their lessons. This time, they formed a battle plan with the assumption that the Swordmaidens charged straight at the enemy battle lines. The Vandals may not be able to exert any control over the actions of their allies, but they could always accompany the Swordmaidens and fight at their side!

"They're off!"

Hundreds of Swordmaiden mechs poured forward in an incredible if uncoordinated tide. There was no hint of formation or coordination in their



charge. The faster mechs ran ahead of the slower mechs. The Silver Valencias which served as the prestige mechs of the Swordmaidens boldly took up the vanguard position and attracted a lot of errant laser fire.

The Hostland Warriors mostly emphasized melee mechs, but many of these mechs came equipped with laser pistols that dealt light damage and ran out of energy fairly quickly.

Nonetheless, the Warrior mechs negated the inherent disadvantages of their weapons by concentrating their firepower.

Their target? The Silver Valencias!

However, these upgraded swordsman mechs designed by Mayra made use of premium compressed armor plating produced at Malligan's Pitstop.

Compressed armor was a rarity in the frontier and the Swordmaidens invested heavily in procuring all of this plating.

The light swats from the laser pistols hardly scorched the exterior of the Silver Valencias no matter how many lasers swept their form!

Not only that, just like the Devil Razors, the Silver Valencias came with a lot of sustained and burst mobility. They already moved fast, but low-profile boosters built into their frames gave the Silver Valencias an extra push whenever they dodged or strode forward.

Ves sighed in admiration at Mayra's best design. Though not cheap by any means, the Silver Valencias more than earned their considerable investment!

"They're even better than my Crystal Lords in defending against laser fire!"

Lydia's Swordmaidens always became restrained by their limited manpower. Few Swordmaiden mech pilots successfully survived their brutal training regime and extremely challenging graduation ceremony. This caused them to invest a considerable amount of resources into the quality of their mechs.

Their best and most deserving Swordmaiden mech pilots received the privilege of piloting the Silver Valencias. Each of them possessed the mindset of a champion and valiantly took leading positions to serve as examples for their fellow Swordmaidens.

"Charge! Charge forward! Show these military mechs what the Swordmaidens are made of!"

With their gravitic backpacks running at full tilt, all of their mechs traversed the ground quickly.

In the face of such an uncoordinated charge, the Hostland Warrior mechs ceased their steady forward progress and formed into defensive formations. Compared to the Swordmaiden mechs who moved like a horde, the Warriors neatly moved into exquisite formations.

Knight mechs at the front, striker mechs at the side, swordsman and spearman mechs in the second line, all of them appeared ready to meet the oncoming charge. The variety of mech types allowed them to exhibit an unimaginable amount of flexibility.

Right now, they set themselves up to meet a huge uncoordinated charge. As long as they blunted the charge and prevented the Swordmaidens from breaking through, they could easily bog down the rabid Swordmaidens and exploit their weaknesses in defense.

Yet the charge of the Swordmaidens arrived with much greater ferocity than the Hostland Warriors expected!

"What is this!? The intelligence reports stated that these are pirates! How come they're so powerful!"

The Swordmaiden mechs struck with their greatswords with the full weight of their momentum behind the initial blow. Even if they chopped straight into the

shields of knight mechs, the incredibly sharp swords cut through them and dug deep grooves into their armor plating!

"Watch out for those swords! They're sharp!"

Lydia's Swordmaidens always worshipped swords from their inception. The mech pilots trained to handle a sword with their own bodies, allowing them to master this weapon no matter if they wielded them in their own hands or with a mech.

Right now, they put all of their skills on display. Combined with their sharp and resilient swords, they momentarily buckled the defensive lines of the Hostland Warriors!

"Come on, Vandals! Don't let the Swordmaidens show us up!"

As hardened military mech pilots, the Hostland Warriors didn't let themselves be affected by their surprise for long. Orders poured in and the Warrior mechs instantly adjusted their formation to cope with the unexpectedly fierce aggression.

Even if the Swordmaiden mechs fought valiantly, they mostly fought individually! The distance between each Swordmaiden mech was a lot wider than usual. This gave them enough room to put their considerable mobility and swordsmanship to full play without the possibility of harming their fellow sisters.

Yet this dispersed formation also allowed the Warrior mechs to surround the Swordmaiden mechs and prevent them from assisting each other.

"The Hostland Warriors are attempting to defeat the Swordmaidens in detail!"

The Warriors formed strong strike teams that went from Swordmaiden mech to Swordmaiden mech. They didn't intend to match the Swordmaidens in skill.

Not a single of the Warrior swordsman mechs came close to matching the female pirates in pure swordsmanship.

Yet their excellent coordination allowed them to move their mechs around and flood the separated Swordmaiden mechs with sheer weight of numbers!

However, the Hostland Warriors only managed to fell a dozen mechs this way before the Vandal mechs arrived to relieve the pressure.

Unlike the Swordmaidens, the Vandals enjoyed considerable support from the rear. The temporary headquarters continued to evaluate the circumstances of the battle and provided plenty of advice to the mech captains. This increased their coordination and allowed them to come up with the correct response to the enemy movements.

"Support the Swordmaiden mechs and cover their flanks! Constrain the Warrior strike teams and pin them in place if possible!"

The Vandal mechs might not fight as ferociously as the Swordmaiden mechs, but they picked and chose their fights to achieve the greatest effect with the least amount of effort. Their efficiency constrained the Hostland Warriors and prevented them from outmaneuvering the Swordmaidens.

"It's a stalemate!"

Ves paid little attention to the battle playing out in the main projection. He devoted most of his attention to analyzing the performance of each enemy mech.

"How many mech designers are working for the Holstand Warriors? They've developed so many different mech models!"

Ves recognized many commonalities among the different designs. The Hostland Warriors evidently didn't lack for mech designers, as they made great use of internally-developed designs.

In general, the Hostland Warriors emphasized armor over mobility. They were designed to endure the rigors of pitched battles like this one. Their endurance was only moderate as they didn't specialize in long drawn-out engagements.

As long as the Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs held out for an hour, then the Hostland Warriors would gradually run out of steam by then, especially in this frigid battle where none of the mechs dared to hold back.

"Yet will we even be able to hold out that long?"

The Hostland Warriors may have received a nasty surprise when the Swordmaiden mechs almost buckled their line, but they recovered smoothly and even gained the advantage in some areas.

Thanks to their defense-oriented mechs, the Hostland Warriors quickly steadied their battle lines. They became as stable as a rock in the face of Swordmaiden and Vandal aggression.

The lack of forward progress annoyed the Swordmaiden mech pilots and caused them to fight back even harder. They wanted to hack down the resilient Warrior mechs!

The battle at the center became so intensive that the Meandering Monkeys didn't dare to stick their noses in it. Their light mechs simply wouldn't be able to block the immense greatswords of the Devil Razors and Silver Valencias!

Instead, besides helping out the ranged mechs at the flanks, they also tried to outmaneuver the Flagrant Swordmaidens. However, the Vandals and Swordmaidens deployed enough light mechs in turn to constrain the Meandering Monkeys for now. Though they couldn't match the Meandering Monkeys forever, it was no problem to hold them up for a short amount of time.

Casualties started to mount as both sides became more familiar with each other. While Ves worked hard to pinpoint the weaknesses of the mechs of the

Hostland Warriors, their designs were inordinately thorough and rounded. Their mech designers left very few openings, and the weak points that Ves pointed out mostly amounted to common weaknesses that every mech type shared.

On the other hand, the mech designers working for the Hostland Warriors detected a lot more weaknesses in the mechs of the Vandals and Swordmaidens. The speed in which the Hostland Warriors defeated their adversaries increased.

A chill ran through Ves as he observed this trend. The Vesians benefited from a mech designer with lots of experience and a good eye! That person may even be a Senior Mech Designer!

Once he realized that, Ves worked twice as hard in deciphering the enemy mechs. He couldn't let this difference widen the disparity between the two forces.

"Senior or not, I won't admit defeat!"

#### **Chapter 885 No Ejection**

A mech lieutenant of the Hostland Warriors gritted his teeth while he piloted his spearman mech in support of his fellow Warriors. When he heard they were about to fight the infamous Vandals along with a bunch of melee-oriented pirates, he expected to fight a running engagement.

When he saw that the enemy formed battlelines and charged forward in a ragged mess, he thought the Warriors would easily be able to break the backs of these unruly dogs.

Reality proved much different from his expectations! The Warriors had always considered the Vandals and pirates as scum who only won through trickery and misdirection. The Vesians never imagined their foe to be so ferocious and undaunting in a pitched battle!

"And these Swordmaidens?! Who the hell are they? Some kind of force of exiled elites!"

Though the Swordmaiden mechs exhibited very poor coordination and teamwork, their hyper-aggressive approach forced the Hostland Warriors into a passive state. They constantly needed to hold the line against these madwomen who knew no fear! No matter how disadvantageous it might be for them to push forward, they threw themselves forward without any regard for logic or safety!

This normally wouldn't fluster the Hostland Warriors so much were it not for the Vandals following after their aggressive allies. The Vandals knew exactly how the Swordmaidens fought and neatly covered their backs, preventing the Warriors from surrounding the Swordmaidens any further.

The battle in the center devolved into a contest of attrition! With the fighting constantly heating up, casualties mounted in quick succession. Dozens of mechs fell before fatal spear strikes or enormously powerful sword chops.

"Hold on! Keep fighting!"

"Don't you dare die before you take a Warrior mech down with you! Our comrades are counting on us!"

It not only became a contest of arms, but also a contest of willpower! The Hostland Warriors arrived on the battlefield with confidence born of their inherent superiority over their foes. Their mech regiment was made to fight these kinds of battles!

The excellent performance of the Meandering Monkeys in the previous skirmishes also inflated their confidence in the previous days. The mech pilots of the Meandering Monkeys constantly bragged about how they ran rings around the enemy light mechs.

This gave the Warriors the mistaken impression that they could easily crush the pathetic enemy mechs in a straightforward battle.

Yet the truth proved to be different, and it mostly came down to willpower!

The Swordmaidens already possessed a lot of courage. Yet the grit and courage of the Flagrant Vandals not only surprised the Vesians, they even surprised themselves.

They hadn't become affected by the dwindling morale or the despair that spread when word of Venerable Xie's assassination spread throughout the camp.

Ves guessed that the mental resilience training sessions that he invented contributed significantly to the strength exhibited by the Vandal mech pilots. They learned how to cope with pressure and continue fighting even with the entire galaxy stacked against them! Even as their mechs got banged up or received near-fatal damage, they still fought as if they didn't know how to retreat!

"Our mech pilots aren't ejecting!" Someone in the headquarters yelled.

"The Swordmaiden mech pilots aren't ejecting either!"

The Vandal and Swordmaiden mech pilots collectively came to an accord. They decided to fight to the death in the truest sense of the phrase. They cut off nearly every possibility of ejecting from their mech in favor inflicting maximum damage to their enemy!

Once the Hostland Warriors realized this, their courage flagged a bit. A mech pilot with nothing to lose became an atrocious opponent. They fought twice as hard as normal and traded wounds without any hesitation if the situation called for it! The only instances where they ejected was if their mechs had already become crippled.



"There are still some spare mechs back in camp! Let's board them and go back into the battle!"

The mech pilots of the Hostland Warriors didn't possess the same determination. Since they believed they held the upper hand against their enemy, they never even considered making a pact to fight to the death.

This behavior was far too crazy!

"Hahahaha! Die! Die! Die!"

"Kill them all! If I can take one more Warrior down with me, then I haven't lived my life in vain!"

"Look at the Warrior mechs beginning to hesitate. Are these the Vesians we've been so afraid about? Their courage is not even a tenth of ours!"

"Hahaha! Look at these cowardly Warrior mech pilots pulling the ejection lever when their precious mechs suffer some scratches. Pansies!"

The deadly battle in the center slowly swung in favor of the Flagrant Swordmaidens despite their obvious weaknesses. If the mech pilots of the Hostland Warriors continued to keep their cool, then they might have noticed that their opponents left a lot of openings.

Yet the unmatched aggression of the Vandals and Swordmaidens was like a punch in the face! The disoriented Hostland Warriors were constantly being put on the backfoot. The only reasons why they hadn't collapsed yet was because their discipline forced them to hold out while their resilient mechs bought them a lot of time.

Even though the Flagrant Swordmaidens made a lot of strides in the center, their mechs couldn't entirely keep up.

The Devil Razors especially incurred an increasing amount of battle damage. While their mobility and offensive power more than matched the Hostland Warriors, Mayra hadn't been able to invest in much of their defenses.

The workhorse mechs of the Swordmaidens started falter in their aggression. The accumulated battle damage along with the steady counterattacks of the Hostland Warriors continued to deplete the combat effectiveness of the Devil Razors.

The Silver Valencias were different, and held out longer than their cheaper cousin. Each Swordmaiden piloting a Silver Valencia were all veteran Swordmaidens who possessed a considerable amount of skill. All of them entangled the officers of the Hostland Warriors, preventing them from running wild in their superior mechs and skills.

To Ves, the battle in the center slowly reached a new equilibrium. While the Warriors didn't have an answer against the courage shown by the Flagrant Swordmaidens, they nonetheless trusted their defenses to hold out long enough to wait for a change in conditions.

"They're patient buggers."

"The Vesians are smarter than they look. They know we're going to run out of steam faster when we fight this hard."

Energy expenditure became an increasingly more important factor the longer the battle stretched on. While the Flagrant Swordmaidens possessed more energy reserves, it still took time to withdraw their mechs and replenish their exhausted energy cells.

The problem right now was that the Vandals and Swordmaidens couldn't afford to let up on their push! As long as they withdrew, the Hostland Warriors would lose their constraints and be able to employ advanced formations!

Someone in the command center observed something alarming. "Our ranged mechs are getting pushed back! They're not as skilled as the Warriors!"

The Vandal rifleman mechs couldn't match the Warrior rifleman mechs in quality or skill. The only advantage they held was that they fought without concern for energy, but even this advantage was fleeting because of heat constraints.

Almost every Vandal rifleman mechs ran piping hot at this stage! Steam billowed out of their frames and the mechs all employed their emergency coolants to keep the heat at bay.

Having reached the limits of their heat capacity, the fire rate of their laser rifles abruptly reduced, giving their Warrior counters plenty of room to breathe.

Unlike the Vandal ranged mechs, the Warriors exercised much greater trigger discipline. They always fired their laser rifles steadily in order to pour down a steady amount of lasers in the midst of their enemies.

Each laser beam landed close or on the Vandal mechs with disturbing regularity!

"Their lasers are hammering us like clockwork! They're timing their shots!"

As for the light mechs, the Vandals and Swordmaidens simply weren't able to field as much as the Meandering Monkeys. The Vesian reconnaissance regiment consisted almost entirely of light mechs so possessed a decisive advantage in this area. The number of Vandal and Swordmaiden light mechs reduced at an alarming rate!

The only area in which the defenders gained the advantage was when they employed their heavy mechs. The ten Akkara mechs unloaded laser beam after laser beam at their distant foes. Their steady targeting and prodigious firepower enabled them to down any enemy mech as long as they enjoyed a clear line of sight!

The only problem was that the battle in the center became jam-packed with mechs from both sides. The tight ranks of Swordmaidens and Vandals prevented the Akkara heavy mechs from blasting the enemy center with impunity.

Instead, they split up and supported the faltering flanks with suppressive firepower. While this wasn't the best way to use them, at the very least the sparser flanks precluded the chance that they would hit their own side.

"Thanks for the help, big guys!"

This temporary propped up the flanks of the Flagrant Swordmaidens and prevented them from collapsing.

The pitched battle devolved into a number of stalemates on all fronts. Mechs continued to be downed by the dozens, but at this rate, the losses sustained by the Hostland Warriors threatened to become extremely egregious.

Even if the Vesians won at the end, they would only be able to enjoy a pyrrhic victory! What was the meaning of killing a thousand men but losing eight-hundred men in the process? None of the Hostland Warriors wanted to be part of the eight-hundred men that sacrificed their lives to achieve this victory.

"These Vandals and Swordmaidens are too tenacious!"

"We should regroup!"

This psychological tendency caused the center of the Hostland Warriors to fall back time and time again. Unlike the Flagrant Swordmaidens, they hadn't mentally prepared themselves to fight to the death!

It was at this time that a booming broadcast engulfed the entire battlefield!

"ENOUGH!"

This single word came with such volume and force of will that it practically forced the Swordmaidens to come out of their blood haze. All of the mechs paused for some reason!

The Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs unwillingly took a step back now that they lost their momentum.

The Hostland Warriors in the center split into two as if someone parted a sea. A single, resplendent mech strode forward in the space opened up by the Warrior mechs.

The Warrior mechs acted as if royalty graced their presence. This was not a normal mech!

The Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs on the other hand couldn't help but take a couple of steps back. They felt a faint but unimaginably potent pressure in the back of their minds. Merely glimpsing at the approaching mech caused their instincts to rebel.

Flee!

Run!

Danger ahead!

In the command center at the rear, before anyone asked a question, Ves already spoke up. "The Hostland Warriors brought out an expert mech. This is absolutely not a simple expert mech either!"

The expert mech that emerged wore the regimental colors of the Hostland Warriors with pride. However, it also carried a small amount of embellishment that denoted its extraordinary status.

The exquisite machine was a customized swordsman mech that not only carried a sword, but a small arsenal of auxiliary weapons. However, Ves didn't

pay too much attention on its varied loadout or its simple but incredible firm design.

"That expert mech incorporates a huge amount of Rorach's Bone!"

"What?! Isn't that the exotic material all the forces recently fought for at the Glowing Planet?!"

A mech laced with Rorach's Bone was absolutely not a trivial machine! Such a mech gained the ability to regenerate battle damage as long as it had access to a source of energy. The more Rorach's Bone a mech incorporated, the faster and more extensive this regeneration process became.

Usually, a mech that consisted of one or two percent of Rorach's Bone was an extravagant luxury that few forces could afford. Such a ratio already made a mech unkillable over long engagements because they could constantly regenerate their exterior battle damage at the cost of expending some energy cells.

Yet the expert mech that appeared from the rear of the Hostland Warriors paled in comparison to those examples.

Ves simply couldn't believe his eyes at what he saw! Yet all of the sensors pointed in the direction of the expert concurred with his initial impression.

"An entire third of this expert mech consists of Rorach's Bone! It's regeneration abilities are insane!"

The Vandals in the command center didn't understand the magnitude of the situation. This expert mech incorporated so much Rorach's Bone that the Hafner Duchy practically wasted half of its quota of this valuable exotic on a single mech!

This was pure extravagance!

## Chapter 886 Extravagant Mech

Ves still remembered the Glowing Planet campaign. A single rogue planet that likely emerged from the galactic heartland or galactic center randomly streaked through the galaxy like it was on a pleasure cruise.

For countless years, no one ever discovered the Glowing Planet coursing through interstellar space. It was actually quite hard to detect planets traveling through the void as they hardly ever leaked any signals.

The Glowing Planet's discovery within the borders of the Bright Republic was a complete coincidence, but the unimaginable amount of wealth contained sent the entire Komodo Star Sector into a frenzy.

The Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom, the two nearest states, only scratched the surface of the unimaginable wealth contained on the planet. Once the Hexadric Hegemony and the Friday Coalition barged in, they claimed over ninety-five percent of all the wealth locked inside the planet.

As of now, all that remained of the Glowing Planet only consisted of loose rubble floating through interstellar space.

Even if the two dominant second-rate states obtained the lion's share of the Glowing Planet's unimaginably valuable minerals and exotics, the Brighters and Vesians at least recovered some scraps.

Rorach's Bone was a genuine high-value exotic material with the consistency of bone. Its regeneration properties made them essential materials in any high-value mech. Even though it cost a lot of energy for them to regenerate battle damage, they naturally drew ambient energy from the air, allowing them to repair delicate components laced with Rorach's Bone as long as some time had passed.

This made them the ideal exotic to use in mechs intended for long deployments in difficult terrain.

However, it would be an enormous waste to employ them in guerilla mechs or the like. Their high value and exceedingly wondrous properties made them far more suitable to be incorporated in expert mechs. Let alone expert mechs, even ace mechs didn't shy away from taking advantage of this great material!

This was because not only would Rorach's Bone be able to grant a mech regenerative properties, it also enormously enhanced its resonant abilities. When alloyed with non-resonant materials and exotics, a small addition of Rorach's Bone allowed them to undergo a huge transformation, granting them resonant properties!

For an expert mech, the higher the proportion of resonating materials, the easier it was for the expert pilot to exhibit stronger resonating abilities.

However, any expert mech would have already gained a decent boost if only 0.1 percent of its material composition consisted of Rorach's Bone. To use up one or two percent would be a generous gift, but elevating the use of Rorach's Bone as the main material for the armor plating, internal frame and all of its core components was extravagant to the extreme!

Ves wanted to puke out blood at the sight of this expert mech from the Hostland Warriors. He didn't believe a single battle mech regiment could afford the consumption of practically half the Rorach's Bone available to an entire duchy. With the same amount of Rorach's Bone, the Hafner Duchy could have outfitted two or three companies of extremely resilient elite mechs.

Such a great number of elite mechs designed for frontline combat would have been a much more versatile use of Rorach's Bone.

That was because if the extravagant expert mech ever got defeated, the Hafner Duchy would suffer an unimaginable amount of losses! Such a devastating injury might even force the current Duke of Hafner to step down!



Yet Lady Amalia somehow managed to convince the Hostland Warriors to bring this extremely expensive mech in her extremely risky jaunt into the deep frontier!

The amount of political capital the lady or her backer expended must have been extremely considerable.

Yet Ves had no doubt that the Vesians considered the price to be worth it, because this expert mech was nearly undefeatable against mundane mechs. Even many expert mechs wouldn't be able to leave a scratch on this mech, including Venerable Xie.

Without sufficient penetration power that could take out the cockpit in a single hit, anyone could forget about defeating this mech! The only other strategy one might be able to deploy was to exhaust its energy cells, but would this expert mech be kind to let its energy reserves be drained?

The more the Vandals heard what Ves had to say about this ridiculously expensive mech, the more they despaired.

"Even if we were still able to field the Pale Dancer, it can't do anything against this mech." Ves decisively declared. "There's no way its upgraded laser rifle can penetrate its self-regenerating armor plating. While Rorach's Bone isn't the toughest material, a laser rifle excels at pouring out a steady amount of damage over time. That's exactly what Rorach's Bone is meant to counter. If we had someone like Venerable O'Callahan piloting a landbound lancer mech, the story would be entirely different."

This also signified that the expert mech that showed wasn't undefeatable despite its profligate use of exotics. Some mech archetypes naturally constrained other types. An expert mech based on Rorach's Bone may seem extremely resilient, but as long as a lancer mech or something charged straight at it with incredible force, it wasn't out of the question for an

empowered lance to pierce through all of the Rorach Bone-empowered armor plating and demolish a core component.

Ves looked at some of the sensor readouts and saw that the expert mech openly broadcasted its transponder without any encryption.

The name of the expert mech sounded deceptively simple.

Belisarius.

Such an act practically dared the Vandals to bombard it with laser beams. Yet no one moved at this time. Even the mechs fighting in the flanks separated from each other. Every mech pilot worshipped expert pilots, and the entry of one of their kind compelled everyone to halt.

Not even the Flagrant Swordmaidens dared to disrespect an expert pilot. This was a common fault of all mech pilots and one that extraordinarily frustrated Ves right now.

A mere announcement from the expert mech halted all the momentum the Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs accumulated through blood and sacrifice!

After a long pause, allowing the Vandals and Swordmaidens to drink in the Belisarius, the expert pilot spoke once again. Her voice thundered through the battlefield.

"Flagrant Vandals. We meet again. You have no idea how much I looked forward to our reunion. Do you remember bullying me at Nova Migolatus I?"

How could they not? All of the Vandal mech pilots present on the battlefield participated in the 'simple' mission for the Vesian rebels. Who knew that an expert candidate could be so man eating? Captain Relia Foster not only put up a hellish fight, she also advanced to expert pilot and immediately exhibited forced resonance that forcefully elevated her bog-standard mech into a psuedo-expert mech!

A lot of Vandal mech pilots lost their lives in order to subdue this newly-risen expert pilot. Who knew she bore such a hatred of the Flagrant Vandals that she'd be willing to go all the way to the deep frontier to satisfy her vengeful urges?

Anyone could tell she held an unimaginable amount of animosity towards the Flagrant Vandals. The acidic pressure emanating out of the Belisarius suppressed all of the Vandal and Swordmaidens mech pilots no matter how much armor plating stood in the way.

This was an expert pilot! A demigod capable of performing the impossible!

And this time she wasn't piloting some standard training mech like last time, but a custom designed expert mech utilizing the most expensive materials and exotics the Hafner Duchy had on hand. No amount of expense had been spared to design this extremely formidable expert mech!

The strength of an expert pilot always rose in proportion with the quality of their expert mech. Even if she only advanced to expert pilot for a short time, her low resonance strength didn't hinder the fact that her mech was massively powerful even if she didn't pull off any fancy tricks!

This was literally throwing money at Venerable Foster to forcibly elevate her effective combat power to the upper ranks of expert pilots!

Every Vandal underestimated the amount of importance the Hafner Duchy placed on this young expert pilot! Some even thought they should have demanded double the ransom to return Venerable Foster. At least that way the Hafner Duchy wouldn't have so much resources to spare on developing this obscenely expensive expert mech.

Captain Byrd's rifleman mech calmly stepped out from the reserve ranks. The standard quality of her looted Vesian rifleman mech stood in stark contrast of the Belisarius. The Vandals were always forced to scrape by, and they

obtained much of their mechs by raiding Vesian shipping convoys and mech factories.

Almost every Vandal who compared the two mechs lamented at the unfairness of this face-off. Captain Byrd could have exhausted all the batteries of her laser rifle and still not be able to scratch the armor plating of the Belisarius!

Yet Captain Byrd strode out anyway, because her duty compelled her to resist an enemy expert pilot's prestige. The amount of courage it took to confront an expert pilot as a regular pilot must have been considerable, yet she faced the pressure head-on with hardly any visible hesitation.

"Venerable Foster." The Vandal mech officer responded in the open. "What happened in the past is just business. Is there truly a need to show up here when you despicable Vesians assassinated our expert pilot against MTA conventions in the eve of battle?"

Venerable Foster snorted. "What expert pilot? Stop talking fantasy! I see no experts here, not that you cowards ever deserve any. While I'm disappointed at how few Vandals are present here, putting you all to death will be a fine appetizer for what I have in store for the rest of your mech regiment! I will not rest until every pirate and Vandal that crosses my path are dead! On this, I swear!"

The Hostland Warriors echoed her declaration. "Death to pirates! Death to pirates! Death to pirates!"

As a Hafner mech regiment, the Hostland Warriors always detested pirates to the core. The Reinald Republic frequently stirred trouble by disguising highly trained mech pilots as 'pirates' and sending them out on destructive raids across the border.

Therefore, in the eyes of every Hafner mech pilot, the Flagrant Vandals were no different from the Reinald Republic's despicate pretend pirates!

Ves recognized the conviction in Venerable Foster's word. This hatred transcended opinion and became an ironclad belief of hers! When it came to expert pilots, Ves knew more than anyone here how their beliefs and convictions formed the basis of their willpower.

An expert pilot almost never changed their minds when it came to their core convictions! Venerable Foster truly meant what she said when she wanted to annihilate the Flagrant Vandals down to the roots!

As if recognizing that the Flagrant Swordmaidens stood no chance at defeating the Vesians anymore with Venerable Foster's entry, Captain Byrd pleaded for mercy.

"Can you at least promise us to spare the non-combatants after the battle?"

"No." Venerable Foster ruthlessly declared. "Pirates deserve no reprieve. According to all the relevant legal conventions, pirates all deserve to be executed. You can forget about "

This caused all of the Vandals in the command center to adopt ugly faces. They pretty much expected they wouldn't be let off due to the sensitive nature of this mission, but to hear the truth spoken so crassly by a respected expert pilot caused their morale to plummet.

Nonetheless, the rifleman mech piloted by Captain Byrd boldly raised its laser rifle and pointed the muzzle straight at the Belisarius.

"Then only one course of action is left. Even if you claim our lives, we will bleed you Vesians every step of the way. Vandals, fight!"

Commander Lydia's customized Silver Valencia stepped forward as well and pointed its greatsword at the Belisarius. "Swordmaidens, let us fight as well! Show this naive young woman what pirates are really made of!"

Many Vandals let loose an unconscious worry in their hearts. Yes and some of the more suspicious Vandals feared the Swordmaidens would give up or even turn their swords against the Vandals. After all, a shrewd pirate leader such as Commander Lydia wouldn't be resigned to fight a losing battle.

However, the Swordmaidens on the ground faced a dead end in every direction. Venerable Foster's ironclad beliefs left no leeway for pirates at all. Even if the Swordmaidens stabbed the Vandals in the back and knelt down in front of Venerable Foster and begged for mercy, the only outcome would be death!

#### **Chapter 887 Blooming Valencias**

The battle resumed the moment Captain Byrd's rifleman mech shot out a laser beam at the Belisarius. Venerable Foster made no moves to dodge the attack and allowed it to splash harmlessly against the surface of her mech.

Out of the varied armament of the Belisarius, Venerable Foster slowly drew out a shortsword in one hand and a compact laser carbine in the other hand.

The heroic bearing of the Belisarius doubled just by wielding this set of weapons!

"Is the Belisarius a hero mech?!"

Strictly speaking, Venerable Foster specialized in piloting swordsman mechs, but a talented expert pilot never limited themselves if they so choose.

This was why a considerable amount of expert mechs broke the strict conventions of their archetypes. As long as enough money supported their design and development, nothing was impossible.

Both Commander Lydia and Captain Byrd began to engage the Belisarius without any hesitation. The custom Silver Valencia raced towards the Belisarius with the tip of its sword pointed straight at the cockpit!

Mayra already told Commander Lydia that the only way to crack open the expert mech's shell was to deliver a devastating piercing attack. However, the Belisarius made a single lazy swipe with its shortsword and neatly deflected the Silver Valencia's greatsword in the most efficient manner possible.

The Silver Valencia almost lost control, but Commander Lydia quickly recovered.

In the meantime, Captain Byrd kept firing laser beam after laser beam at the Belisarius without result.

"Akkara mechs, concentrate on the enemy expert mech!"

The heavy cannons hesitated at the thought of attacking an expert mech, but they knew their duty. They unloaded on the Belisarius which showed no signs of trying to evade.

Over forty beams of full-powered laser cannon beams struck the Belisarius head-on! Many of those lasers focused their fire straight at specific portions of the prone mech such as the joints.

No result!

"How can this be?!"

The combined firepower of ten heavy cannons proved to be completely insufficient to leave a scratch on the expert mech!

"The Belisarius has already activated its energy field!" Ves spoke. "It's a completely internal energy field that enhances the resilience of its armor plating!"

The armor plating of the Belisarius consisted largely Rorach's Bone. This not only enabled it to regenerate, but also made it extremely easy to resonate with the mech pilot's will. An energy field that empowered the armor of the expert mech

"Captain Byrd, leave this battle to the Swordmaidens." Commander Lydia gritted her teeth over the channel. "We have never feared a greater foe and we will not falter now! Silver Valencias! To me!"

All of the Silver Valencias in the frontline pulled back and rallied to Commander Lydia. The gathering of a dozen or so Silver Valencias made for a very awe-inspiring sight, yet Ves knew that the disparity in skill and mech quality was far too wide for them to pose a threat to the Belisarius.

Yet the Swordmaiden champions still showed courage against these overwhelming odds!

"Fight! Fight as if we're facing the greatest exobeast in the galaxy!"

The Valiant mech pilots of the Silver Valencias overcame their fear towards expert mechs and undoubtedly started to surround the Belisarius. They didn't underestimate the expert mech and adopted tactics geared towards fighting exobeasts.

The Silver Valencias put their mobility and offensive power to good use by darting forward and making a quick sword strike before falling back out of range. Due to the presence of the laser carbine, the Silver Valencias also tried to stay in the expert mech's rear if possible.

For some reason, the Belisarius hardly roused its might. It parried the simultaneous sword strikes with contemptuous ease. It was as if she was an adult slapping away some recalcitrant children.

In the meantime, the other mechs resumed their battle as well. This time, the battle firmly tilted in the favor of the Vesians.



It couldn't be helped. The mere existence of Venerable Foster on the battlefield pressed down on the Flagrant Swordmaidens. Not only had they lost their only expert pilot recently, they also saw how easy the Belisarius withstood so much laser fire.

There was no way they could crack this mech!

While the Swordmaidens drew inspiration from the rabid but largely futile attacks of the Silver Valencias, the Vandals possessed frailer hearts and couldn't help but be affected by the disparity in strength.

As a military mech regiment, they knew better than anyone how the presence of an expert mech skewed the balance of powers. Sometimes, knowing more was not always an advantage! If only they were as ignorant as the Swordmaidens, who still harbored hopes of taking down the Belisarius!

"Our center is being pushed back! There aren't any Silver Valencias to hold back the Warrior mech officers!"

The champions and mech officers of the Hostland Warriors lost the constraints of the Silver Valencias. While the mech officers of the Vandals tried to plug the gaps, the Vandals never possessed many talents in the first place so they simply couldn't make up for the disparity in numbers or skill.

Not only that, the loss of morale among the Vandals imperceptibly slowed their responsiveness. They fought like a deflated balloon, and the difference in battle intent became extremely stark when compared to their Swordmaiden allies.

"You bunch of good-for-nothings!" A Vandal mech officer cursed his subordinates. "Where's your earlier conviction?! Keep fighting! Don't give up! Even if we'll all die, we'll drag down as many Vesians as we can!"

Even if the Vandals gathered their courage and continued to fight, Venerable Foster's presence in the middle of the battlefield served as a form of unbridled suppression that weighed down on all of their hearts.

The fear and respect they held towards expert pilots was simply too huge!

As a bystander who possessed a clear overview of the battle, Ves observed this tendency with clear detail. He discreetly shook his head.

"The worship of expert pilots has always been a double-edged sword."

The battle ramped up around the flanks as well. The rifleman mechs became less affected by the presence of the Belisarius. Right now, they only focused their attention on each other.

The Meandering Monkeys stopped playing around and fought with much greater urgency. It was as if they all wanted to distinguish themselves in Venerable Foster's presence!

While they took much more risks, they also achieved greater results. The Vandal and Swordmaiden light mechs fell in much greater frequency than before, and it would only take about fifteen minutes before they were wiped out!

The clash between light mechs favored the Meandering Monkeys so much that some of them already broke off and tried to harass the center force of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Their threats towards the rear threw the ranks of the Vandals and Swordmaidens into slight disarray. It made an enormous difference if they were forced to watch their rear!

All of this accelerated the slow collapse of the center. As Venerable Foster hailed from the Hostland Warriors and still enjoyed the position of mech captain in this mech regiment, their mech pilots fought with greater courage and inspiration.

"Don't shame yourselves in front of our little lassie!"

"Let us prove we can reach Venerable Foster's heights!"

"Venerable Foster has promised an hour of private tutoring for each pirate mech you destroy!"

That last offer practically supercharged the Warrior mech pilots. Nothing was more valuable than personal attention from an expert pilot! The Warriors responded with incredible fanaticism at the thought of their personal idol bestowing their attention on them. How could they not let this chance slip past their fingers?!

"Fight fight fight!"

"They're just pirates!"

"Look at them flustering under our might!"

Even though the reallocation of the Silver Valencias shouldn't have affected the battle in the center that much, the Flagrant Swordmaidens continued to be pushed back time and time again.

The absence of the Swordmaiden champions, the Meandering Monkeys pressing at their rear, and above all else the huge disparity in morale decisively tipped the balance.

The main force of the Flagrant Swordmaidens no longer possessed the power to vanquish the Hostland Warriors grinding against them. They lost too many mechs while the Hostland Warriors mostly managed to hold on by virtue of their coordination and defensive prowess.

The difference in quantity continued to increase, putting more and more pressure on the surviving Vandals and Swordmaidens. Even if they resolved not to eject, they hardly held out longer than if they ejected earlier!

The Belisarius on the other hand started to showcase more of its prowess over time. While Venerable Foster still behaved as if she was fighting against children, the Silver Valencias did not dare to slack off. They put their utmost effort into fighting the Belisarius and did not spare a thought for the consequences!

At some point, the Silver Valencias changed their fighting pattern. Commander Lydia appeared to have issued a drastic order that caused the Silver Valencias to storm at the Belisarius all at once from each direction!

This caused the Belisarius to sweep her shortsword around in a full circle to parry all of the attacks. Yet the moment it did so, the Silver Valencias all released their grips on their greatswords and instead dove in to hold the Belisarius with their limbs.

The Swordmaiden mechs wanted to press down the expert mech!

"Brilliant!" Ves exclaimed. "The strong points of the Belisarius are that it possesses a versatile loadout, its extremely tough and it's capable of self-regeneration. However, a single mech has its limits, and it's impossible for it to possess the power to lift a dozen mechs with its own strength!"

It wasn't easy to increase the mechanical power of a mech. The Belisarius was like a turtle with an unbreakable, self-regenerating shell.

Yet even a turtle could be immobilized as long as someone piled enough rocks on top of its shell!

Yet how could such an extravagantly expensive mech be vulnerable to pileup tactics? Ves already had a bad feeling about this as soon as the Silver Valencias all mobbed the seemingly unprepared Belisarius.

The energy field encompassing its tough exterior caused the Silver Valencias to be corroded at the touch. It was extremely harmful to stay into physical contact with the energy field. The Swordmaidens only hoped that the

Belisarius ran out of energy before the mechs pressing down the Belisarius whittled away.

Some of the Silver Valencias attempted to damage the expert mech's gravitic backpack. Even its gravitic backpack was a class of its own, being especially small and thin. Yet the energy field covering it allowed the Swordmaidens no purchase.

The Belisarius started to glow. Ves saw its resonance spiking as Venerable Foster activated one of the special abilities of the mech.

The amount of activity the sensors detected that the Belisarius started to activate a powerful ability!

At this moment, Commander Lydia issued a fatal command. "Silver Valencias, self-destruct!"

At this moment, some portion within the Silver Valencias bloomed and brightened. Just seconds later, they all blew up as their power reactors overloaded!

Ves realized the Silver Valencias had already run their power reactors at the edge of running out of control. Not only that, the Silver Valencias carried many volatile materials that enhanced the explosions!

"Mayra must have planned this from the start." He uttered in amazement.

While it wasn't so unusual to rig a mech to blow, for them to explode with such potency required a lot of specific measures. This couldn't have been prepared on a whim!

The Swordmaidens piloting the Silver Valencias planned to sacrifice their lives from the start!

The huge overlapping blasts came so suddenly that the entire center started to stagnate in their fighting. They waited for the blast to die down and the smoke to drift away.

Had the Swordmaiden champions managed to harm the Belisarius?!

Once the smoke of the simultaneous explosions drifted away, the Belisarius came back into view.

Its laser carbine turned into scrap. It hadn't survived the explosions. Yet besides some scorch marks and some extremely tiny cracks, the Belisarius managed to survive the suicide attacks unscathed!

"No! How can this be?!"

Even the cracks started closing up at visible speed due to the remarkable properties of the Rorach's Bone.

The Belisarius calmly climbed up to its feet. It experimentally tested its range of motion and observed no damage to its limbs. It held out its shortsword and pointed it at the nearest mechs at the center.

"Playtime is over."

### **Chapter 888 Final Respec**

Besides Commander Lydia's personal mech, the Swordmaidens lost all of their Silver Valencias. Their combined suicide attacks subjected the Belisarius to an enormous amount of damage, yet the expert mech hadn't suffered any harm!

From the force of the explosions that the sensors observed, Ves estimated that it should have stood a decent chance at crippling the Pale Dancer. Yet this enormous sacrifice was in vain as the Belisarius only lost its laser carbine.

This time, even the Swordmaidens quaked. This Belisarius was too perverse of a mech!

"This mech can't be stopped!"

Venerable Foster outright ignored Commander Lydia and turned around to storm at the Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs fighting in the center. Like a wolf among sheep, her Belisarius reaped the lives of those she considered pirates without holding much back!

The Belisarius moved with power and gusto, showcasing the power behind its frame. It was not only an unkillable bulwark of a mech, it also possessed enough strength to cut through medium mech armor with a single sweep of its sword!

Venerable Foster felled mechs by the second, paying little attention to what came in the way of her mech. She utilized the most fundamental sword moves instead of any transcendent techniques empowered by resonance.

Nonetheless, her killing efficiency was extremely dreadful as her simple-looking but extremely sharp and sturdy sword cut through every mech even if she slashed through the thickest chest armor portion of a mech!

"Spread out! Don't fight against the Belisarius! Storm the Vesians and take them down with you! For the Republic!"

"For the Republic!"

The Vandals collected themselves and adopted the most appropriate tactic in the face of this indomitable expert mech. Since they couldn't kill the Belisarius even if they threw more than a thousand mechs at it, then they might as well focus on her comrades instead!

The Hostland Warriors faced a renewed offensive as the Vandal mechs suddenly fought as ferociously as the Swordmaidens. While the Warriors became extraordinarily valiant when battling alongside Venerable Foster, the Flagrant Swordmaidens took extreme risks in order to take down their opponents.

Many times, they traded wounds, attempting to down the Warrior mechs at the cost of their own!

More sinisterly, the Vandals and Swordmaidens aimed most of their attacks at the cockpit area! The Hostland Warriors could forget about ejecting from their downed mechs so that they could live to fight another day. The Flagrant Swordmaidens wanted them to bleed!

In ordinary circumstances, mech pilots didn't specifically aim at the cockpits of their opponents due to several reasons. First, depending on their enmity, they didn't wish to escalate the killing. Replacing a mech was just a matter of spending more money, but replacing a trained mech pilot could be inordinately difficult at some times.

Second, mech regiments that gained a reputation for bloodthirstiness easily attracted retaliation. Those who dish it out should always accept that someone else might dish the same in return. Some conflicts never inflicted much casualties on both sides because they formed a gentleman's agreement not to go too far with regards to killing mech pilots.

Third, the cockpit was one of the most protected portions of a mech. The higher the quality of a mech, the higher the degree of protection. In order to win a battle in the most efficient manner possible, a mech pilot only had to disable a mech, and that could be done in easier ways than targeting the cockpit.

However, the war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom long surpassed those limits. The unending hatred between the two states led both of them to target the opposite's mech pilots whenever possible.

This was because the manpower for mech pilots only ran so far! The Vandals aiming at the cockpits of their Vesian counterparts knew that they would never



be able to survive this battle or its aftermath, so they wanted to make their sacrifices meaningful and contribute to the war effort.

The faster one side began to run short on mech pilots, the closer it came to defeat!

As for the Swordmaidens, they didn't think that much. They merely wanted to prey on the lives of the Warrior mechs because of spite. They never slacked off their killing intent even against rival pirate gangs. The crazier they fought, the more their reputation glowed!

"The battle is going downhill for us." A staff officer announced.

"The Belisarius should have expended a lot of energy, right? How much longer can it fight like this?"

"I estimate that the Belisarius can fight at least an hour or two." Ves analyzed.

"The expert mech looks like it is fighting intensely, but in truth it isn't performing at its peak performance right now. In fact, Venerable Foster even halved the strength of her mech's energy field to save energy."

With this decision alone, she basically expressed that she didn't need to be on guard when fighting against the riffraff in her way!

Those in the command center witnessed the frigid battle with fading eyes. They could read the progress of the battle as well as anyone.

They were losing on all fronts. The center rapidly fell apart under the loss of the Silver Valencias and the unrestrained butchering by the Belisarius.

The flanks fared a little better at first, but once the Meandering Monkeys shifted their focus to attacking the Vandal and Swordmaiden rifleman mechs, it all went downhill there as well. The natural opponent of rifleman mechs were exactly these fast and mobile light mechs!

The Akkara heavy mechs tried to relieve the pressure, but even their prodigious firepower couldn't match a tenth of the killing potential displayed by the Belisarius.

In fact, the Akkara mech pilots placed their fingers on the self-destruct button. One of the most depressing jobs that the mech technicians had done over the last few days was to add this option to the heavy cannons.

No matter what, the Vesians could forget about salvaging these strategic mechs!

Captain Byrd's projection appeared in the middle of the commander center. Her voice patched in shortly after. She sounded extraordinarily weary even as her rifleman mech contributed to the fighting in earnest.

"The battle is lost. We have lost too many mechs. Even if the Belisarius falls back right now, the rest of the Hostland Warriors and Meandering Monkeys outnumber us three to two, and it is only getting worse. I'm ordering a full evacuation. You know what to do. Don't leave anything left to the Vesians. Split up and run to the Starlight Megalodon. I hope that some of you live to tell the tale of our fall. Don't let the Vesians publicize a one-sided narrative."

When the Vandals looked at Captain Byrd's crestfallen expression, they saw the defeat in her eyes. Hope had faded and the sun had set on the Flagrant Swordmaiden ground forces.

"Captain..." Another staff officer hesitated. "It has been an honor."

Everyone stood up and saluted Captain Byrd's projection. None of them had any complaints about her leadership. The Vandals could only blame their bad luck at encountering the Vesians at this juncture. None of them foresaw they'd meet an indomitable existence like Venerable Foster.

A tragedy always occurred when a force accompanied by an expert pilot clashed against a force without one!

Mech pilots died at extraordinary speed. The Hostland Warriors became profoundly enraged at the Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs for deliberately targeting their cockpits. They didn't show any mercy and crunched any cockpit they encountered! The hatred between the two sides had reached such a heated stage that they cared more about snuffing out lives than downing mechs!

Hundreds of mech pilots from both sides lost their lives, and this was only the start. The Vesians were indeed paying a grievous price even with Venerable Foster's intervention, but the Vandals and Swordmaidens could only look forward to total annihilation!

As soon as Captain Byrd gave the final authorization, the entire camp and supply train began to buzz. While Ves and many other Vandals downloaded the records of the battle to his comm, others started scuttling valuable equipment and supplies.

Numerous detonations wracked the camp as databanks, 3D printers and other highly valuable machinery got blown to bits! The Flagrant Swordmaidens also prime more powerful explosives and set them up as nasty surprises for any Vesians that came close.

Hundreds of Vandals and Swordmaidens boarded fast transports prepped for evacuation. Fast transports with empty cargo holds all spread out and entered the red zone while marching at full tilt. While these vehicles would likely break down very soon due to being subjected by the red zone's strong breakdown effect, the head-start they provided the passengers might allow them to reach the Starlight Megalodon before the Vesians got around to catching up.

As for the heavy transports, they were way too slow to escape any pursuit. Each of them blew up in quick succession as pre-planted explosives did their work in scrapping them entirely.

Throughout all of these explosions, Ves quickly ran out of the temporary headquarters with a pack slung behind his Earth Ant. He ran over all the way to the Swordmaiden side of the camp and pushed his way through the dazed crowd of evacuating slaves.

The Swordmaidens idly sent the slaves packing and ordered them to run in each direction. With thousands of slaves spreading out, the Vesians would have to expend a considerable amount of manpower in chasing them all down. This increased the chances of the Vandals and Swordmaidens of reaching the safe zone.

"Ketis, where are you! It's time to go!" Ves yelled as soon as he entered a familiar workshop.

Mayra and Ketis faced off against each other. Both of them appeared in their fully armed and armored. The only difference was that Ketis prepared a pack of supplies while Mayra seemed resigned to the situation.

"Why are you so obstinate?! Please go with us! You still have a chance of making it out!" Ketis pleaded.

"I'm old, Ketis. You're young and still full of life, but I'm already past the prime of my age."

"That's a crap argument! You can easily live sixty more years!"

Mayra shook her head. She gazed at Ketis with sadness and love. "I have already lived a life of adventure alongside Commander Lydia. I'm tired. I don't want to run anymore. I'll take my chances with the Vesians. They won't easily ignore the value of a Journeyman Mech Designer who isn't registered with the MTA. Even if the Vesians sentence me to death, I have no regrets."

As Ketis puffed up and prepared a response, Ves placed his gauntlet on her shoulder armor. "Stop it. Mayra made her choice. Please respect her wishes and go along her arrangements. She only wishes the best for you."

Tears streaked from her eyes. "I don't want what's best for me! I want what's best for us!"

"I want that as well, but we can't have everything. We're simply not powerful enough to change this circumstance."

Ketis gritted her teeth and squeezed the tears out of her eyes. "What will it take to save everyone's lives?"

"Become more powerful. Advance your mech designer rank. Once you become a Master, you only need to utter a single sentence to save someone's life or condemn them to death."

Ves exaggerated, of course. Even Master Mech Designers possessed foes, and each of their actions came with considerable weight.

Yet his words succeeded in stoking the fire of ambition in Ketis. He specifically threw out those words to motivate her to greater heights. She would forever recall this disaster and use it as a reminder to grow stronger!

Mayra threw a sharp glance at Ves, but she tacitly consented to his trick.

"Listen to Ves. Follow him. I know not what kind of escape route he arranged, but it is better than running around blindly."

Even though they never became close, both Mayra and Ves respected each other due to their shared profession. They never exhibited any rivalry and neither did they take their rank differences into account.

Nonetheless, Ves felt extraordinarily honored to have received her recognition.

"I promise to take good care of your protege. She will surely live on!"

## Chapter 889 Unexplainable Feelings

Ves and Ketis ran out of the workshop with their packs slung behind their backs. The Swordmaiden mech designer attached the floating scabbard that usually floated after her on her back this time.

Caught up in their panic, fear of death and gleeful vandalism, the Vandals and Swordmaidens around them didn't notice the odd pairing. Those who left instinctively grouped up but didn't really care about who they fled with. Others didn't bother about running and resolved to wreck as much gear as possible.

"Run, brothers! Live on and tell our tale! Don't let our mech regiment forget about our sacrifice!"

The centuries of hatred fermenting between the Brighters and the Vesians along with the sensitive nature of the mission insured that few would live past this day. Perhaps in civilized space the two sides didn't dare to go too far, but out here in the deep frontier the Vesians anything could happen.

A lot of servicemen and pirates already evacuated beforehand on the fleeing fast transports. Though they wouldn't make it far into the red zone, they still hoped to reach the fabled safe zone.

Nonetheless, plenty still remained behind to perform some final errands. They also figured that the Vesians would pursue the fast transports first. They gambled upon fleeing in a neglected direction and use their field craft to hide their presence from Vesian pursuers. The hilly, craggy, half-broken and complex terrain in the red zone easily allowed small figures to squeeze through the cracks and hide themselves from most scanners.

With so many Vandals and Swordmaidens fleeing in the red zone, Ves figured there might be a decent chance for a handful of them to make it to the Starlight Megalodon. No matter what, the intense breakdown effect and the interference in the air enormously complicated any searches.

"Where are we going?!" Ketis asked as she followed after Ves.

"The third party I've contacted is waiting for us at a specific location! Let's hurry up because she won't linger around forever!"

Both of them jogged out of the collapsing camp and headed into the red zone at an angle. They avoided the straightest route towards the Starlight Megalodon and instead honed in on the outer edge.

Not many Vandals and Swordmaidens fled towards this direction as it didn't bring them towards the safety of the red zone.

Right now, the mechs of the Flagrant Swordmaidens no longer maintained their combat cohesiveness. The Hostland Warriors and Meandering Monkeys surrounded them in order to annihilate them to the last mech.

Some of the Meandering Monkeys already turned towards the enemy camp. Their approach was only a matter of time!

"It's here!" Ves said after they ran for ten minutes straight. "Calabast! Where are you!"

A stealthed vehicle emerged into view. It consisted of a small, slim aircar-sized crawler. Six sturdy legs supported a narrow chassis.

Ves immediately recognized the exquisite application of stealth technology. The Six-Sided Dice he jointly developed with Chief Avanaeon was like a horse cart in front of this crawler in terms of stealth refinement!

A hatch opened up, revealing Miss Calabast sitting behind the controls. "Get in quick! The Meandering Monkey mechs are already surrounding the perimeter. The sooner we go the smaller the chance we get caught!"

While Ketis looked stunned at the appearance of the stealth crawler, Ves shoved her inside and squeezed in after her. The interior of the crawler obviously underwent some hasty modifications. The rear portion of the interior

should have held a crash seat or the like, but someone crudely cut away the fittings in order to make room.

Even then, Ketis and Ves barely fit in the rear! Their armor pressed and chafed against each other as they tried and failed to get comfortable. Ketis even had to detach her scabbard and place it on her lap at an awkward angle to make room. The crawler had never been designed to accommodate more than two people!

"I see now why you said we couldn't bring Mayra along." Ketis uttered with barely any emotion. "If this vehicle was bigger..."

"Sorry doll, but this stealth crawler is a state-of-the-art all-terrain infiltration vehicle." Miss Calabast said from the front. Garbed in her semi-flexible reinforced infiltrator suit, she looked completely out of place from the passengers wearing rigid combat armor. "To be frank, we only ever use this crawler to sneak in or extract solo operatives. It's capacity may not be much, but its stealth systems are top-notch. Bigger isn't always better!"

As someone who studied stealth technology from the ground up, Ves knew what she meant. The larger the vehicle, the more energy and processing power required to sustain active stealth.

A crawler like this was obviously designed to minimize all possible forms of emissions on land. A stealth shuttle may be faster and possess more reach, but the disturbance thrown up in the air by a passing vehicle in flight was a lot harder to cover up.

Obviously, its long but narrow profile was a deliberate design feature. The small size of the crawler also allowed it to squeeze through narrow terrain features or even smaller alleyways. Stealth vehicles stereotypically consisted of broad, squat shuttles so a crawler like this fell out of most people's expectations.



"What's this vehicle called?" He asked with evident curiosity in his voice. "Who designed this crawler?"

"Wouldn't you like to know." Miss Calabast smirked.

Evidently, she knew more but kept her mouth shut. This crawler was a highly sophisticated stealth vehicle designed by a considerably powerful organization. Calabast didn't dare to mention any names because that might allow someone to trace its origins.

The crawler engaged its stealth systems again and began to plod slowly into the red zone. Ves noticed that the crawler moved fairly briskly under a complete antigrav field.

"Isn't it risky to run a full antigrav field? Any mech with a decent set of gravitic sensors will be able to detect its presence." Ves questioned.

Miss Calabast nonchalantly shrugged. "Relax, Ves. This crawler has a lot of capabilities. Combined with the interference, a mech has to come within a kilometer to be able to detect anything amiss. That's plenty of time for me to deactivate the field. We'll have to endure the heavy gravity head-on when that's the case, so I suggest you lie down."

That was easier said than done. Ves and Ketis barely squeezed together in a sitting position due to their bulky armor. In order to lie down, they needed to lay on top of each other, which neither of them wanted to do!

As the crawler went underway, a raft of emotions flitted through Ketis. She became increasingly distressed at the implications of this defeat. Many of her sisters would surely lose their lives! Mayra's fate remained unknown and her possible death cast an enormous shadow over her heart.

Ves tried to exercise some self-control. He adopted a rigid expression in order to avoid giving any ammunition to the extremely perceptive Calabast.

Still, he couldn't slow down the fluctuations of his heart.

The Flagrant Vandals were his comrades as well. Even though he never held a permanent position within the mech regiment, Ves spent too much time among them to remain detached. He held a considerable amount of respect for the likes of Captain Byrd, Chief Dakkon and Dr. Tillman.

The thought of their imminent capture and execution weighed heavily on his mood. He felt profoundly helpless that a mech designer like him was absolutely powerless in the face of superior Vesian might.

Just like Ketis, Ves yearned to obtain the power to protect those he cared about! He did not want to repeat this miserable experience ever again.

The battle between mechs only involved a thousand mech pilots at most, but the support personnel added up to ten-thousand men and women. The outcome of the battle affected all of their lives, condemning them to death no matter how hard they fought back.

This was the tragedy involving battles between mechs! Once a side lost its capability to field mechs, they no longer possessed the power to resist their enemy's predation!

The strong devoured the weak, and on a battlefield like this, there was nothing stronger than a mech. Even after incurring all of those losses, the Hostland Warriors and Meandering Monkeys each retained more than a hundred functional mechs each.

Just this might was more than enough to sweep away most of the fleeing Vandals and Swordmaidens!

"Why did you choose to bring me along?" Ketis suddenly asked, interrupting the tense silence in the crawler. "You're a Brighter, right? Why not choose to rescue one of your own?"

Ves asked this question to himself many times. When Miss Calabast initially consented to his request of bringing along an extra, he spontaneously settled on Ketis.

Why?

Frankly speaking, while Ves considered Ketis his student and his friend, properly speaking the Vandals belonged to his own side. Why did he decide to skip over his own brothers and sisters?

As a Novice Mech Designer with a patchy foundation, Ketis possessed no value to Ves. What she could do, Ves could do better. Besides her considerable swordsmanship and combat prowess, she added nothing to the table.

On the other hand, if Ves extended the invitation to someone else, he might have been able to gain more confidence in their survival. Bringing someone like Chief Dakkon along enormously enhanced their technical prowess. A chief engineer specialized in the operation of starships, so Chief Dakkon would have been the perfect companion to accompany Ves and Miss Calabast into a battleship.

Opting to rescue someone like Dr. Tillman on the other hand plugged a very crucial gap in understanding the local life. With all of the deliberate genetic modification going on, they would certainly encounter biological horrors along the way. One of the biggest reasons why the ground forces of the Flagrant Swordmaidens achieved significant success was because they managed to research some of the mysteries surrounding the wildlings and the god species.

Nonetheless, Ves didn't forget about the initial exploration party and the follow-up party of mechs and transports. If Miss Calabast didn't lie about the

safe zone, then there was a good chance he'd be able to reunite with the Vandals and Swordmaidens cut off from the rest.

After a long and obvious pause, Ves finally answered the question. "I guess I care about you more than the Vandals. I think you hold a lot of promise as a mech designer. It's a shame for you to land in the clutches of the murderous Vesians."

Ketis may be a mech designer, but she was also a Swordmaidens who fully embraced their traditions. Her extensive genetic modification changed her outward appearance and strengthened her beyond the baseline human norm. To the undiscerning Hafner mech pilots, they would certainly paint her in the same brush as depraved pirates such as the Red Tongs. Her fate wouldn't be good.

Yet that didn't sound like a sufficient reason for Ves to opt to take her along. In truth, Ves simply couldn't explain it. The thought of picking anyone else over Ketis just felt wrong to him. Why was he being so irrational about this momentous decision? It felt as if he couldn't exert control over this aspect.

No amount of logic and rationality could defeat his feelings on this matter!

Miss Calabast smirked behind the controls, but she refrained from fanning the flames.

As the crawler slowly trod deeper into the red zone, Ves tried to distract his attention away from this unexplainable conundrum. He'd rather talk shop than talk about his feelings.

"We're venturing straight into the heart of the red zone right? Won't this technologically-advanced stealth crawler break down very quickly?" Ves asked.

Miss Calabast shrugged. "I never intended for us to make it all the way across in this crawler anyway. Rest assured, there are still ways for us to circumvent

the Vesian search parties when we are forced to go on foot. Don't forget that the Vesians are subject to the same effects as well. They only developed a limited amount of mechs that are resistant to the destructive environmental effects, and they'll be keeping their eyes peeled on much more visible stragglers. As long as we make a decent effort at hiding our emissions, their impaired sensors won't be able to pick us up."

That didn't sound very reassuring, but it was better than nothing.

### **Chapter 890 Cheat Mech**

A day quietly passed while the stealth crawler traversed the rough terrain. Due to the highly uneven elevation and the crawler's many limitations, the vehicle only traversed twenty kilometers or so. They still had four days ahead if the crawler made it all the way through.

"Strange." Miss Calabast muttered behind the controls. "While some of the parts are already starting to creak, it's not deteriorating as fast as I thought. I think we can make it at least two-thirds of the way before we have to abandon the crawler."

This sent Ves into thought. Did he somehow extend the same immunity against the breakdown effect towards the crawler? It still sounded as if the range of this immunity field wasn't all that extensive, as the crawler still suffered from a shortened lifespan.

Nonetheless, the longer the three occupants rode the stealth crawler, the less they needed to worry about traversing the red zone on foot.

The rear compartment truly didn't offer Ves and Ketis much room to settle in. Only after an extensive amount of squirming did they manage to settle into a somewhat comfortable half-leaning position.

No one entered into conversation. The shock of losing the battle and the trauma of losing their comrades affected Ves and Ketis profoundly. The only

person who didn't care about the final fate of most of the Vandals and Swordmaidens calmly piloted the stealth crawler.

She needed to put her full attention on navigating through the complex terrain. Not only did she need to be attentive about encountering gaping crevices and sheer cliffs, she also needed to keep her senses peeled against highly corrosive and radioactive craters.

The closer they got to the Starlight Megalodon, the denser the hazards in their way. The fighting that occurred in the past left very few traces behind. Ves occasionally spotted remnants of ancient mechs and other pieces of corroded equipment scattered among the terrain.

He zoomed in on them with the crawler's screen projection and attempted to figure out the properties of the remnants. He wanted to understand what exactly went on all those years ago, but so far he found little clues. Some infighting occurred between the survivors of the Starlight Megalodon, but what did they fight for and why did their differences become so heated that they didn't hesitate to come to blows?

"You're not going to find out anything no matter how intently you stare at the remains." Miss Calabast remarked without turning back her head. "My operatives attempted to decipher the history behind the traces left behind by that ancient battle, but too much time has passed. Time wipes away all traces. The only way you can ever uncover the truth of what happened so long ago is to dig it out from the Starlight Megalodon."

It seemed the battleship held every answer. The reason for the mission, the justification for all the sacrifices and the truth of Aeon Corona VII's grand design.

"You know something, do you, Calabast?" Ves tried to fish for information again. "Since you went through all this effort to retrieve me from the sinking

ship of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens, can you tell me now why you need my help?"

"Patience, Ves. All will be explained in due time. There is no need to go into the details right now."

"Can you at least tell me if it has to do with designing mechs? I'd like to know the answer so I can mentally prepare myself."

Miss Calabast threw a brief glance behind her shoulder. "It's a little complicated, but you will definitely be required to demonstrate your design abilities. The better you are, the higher the chances of success. Rest assured that I won't skimp out on the rewards as long as you put in your full effort."

Ves frowned at that. "If it's design ability that you need, why didn't you approach Mayra of the Swordmaidens? She's a bona fide Journeyman Mech Designer."

"She's a woman." Calabast shrugged. "What I need is a man."

Ketis shot up at that, causing both her and Ves to jostle in the rear compartment. "Hey! What is that supposed to mean?!"

"It's exactly what it sounds like, kid. There are strict identity requirements. A woman won't do. Out of all the available mech designers in the vicinity, little Ves here ranks at the top of the list."

Neither Ves nor Ketis understood Calabast's intentions.

However, Ketis still felt indignant that this inscrutable spy passed over a highly capable mech designer like Mayra in favor of a much younger Ves. If Calabast approached Mayra, then Ketis might not have lost her mentor.

She adopted a pained expression as she stared daggers at Calabast. The spy took no notice of the girl, dismissing her as an inconsequential passenger.

Ves understood he wouldn't be able to milk any information from someone as shrewd as Miss Calabast. The woman only released information that she wanted him to know, and nothing more. His intuition always warned him that this woman constantly weaved truths with lies, and she did it with such a deft fashion that even the most advanced lie detector would be thrown into confusion.

The matter of her allegiance still nagged at Ves. It was like a discordant noise hitting his ears that just didn't go away.

Who did she work for? What was her position? How did she arrive at Aeon Corona VII?

Too many questions of this nature lingered in his mind, and Ves had the feeling that he was overlooking something huge the longer he was ignorant of her true loyalties.

Even the technology and gear that Calabast bandied about didn't reveal anything about her origin. The stealth crawler and reinforced infiltrator suit seemed to be a bit too advanced to be supplied by an intelligence agency of a third-rate state, but they were also somewhat underwhelming for an intelligence agency of a second-rate state.

Ves couldn't even rule out if she was an agent from another star sector or even from a trans-galactic organization.

Naturally, none of the gear she used displayed any brands or symbols. Ves doubted he could even find a single serial number even if he disassembled the entire stealth crawler.

A slight rumbling rattled the compartment. A beep sounded out from the control panel.

"Incoming enemy mech! Hold on, we're hunkering down!" Miss Calabast warned.



She quickly guided the stealth crawler against a small cliff that blocked it from view from many directions. The crawler folded and restricted its six insectile legs and turned its stealth systems up another notch while deactivating every non-essential systems.

The moment the vehicle secured itself against the ground, Miss Calabast leaned back on her chair, causing it to press against the passengers of the back. Only then did she slowly dial down the antigrav field until it faded away entirely.

Painful moans escaped from Ketis. Six times standard gravity pressed down on their bodies without any discrimination.

Surprisingly, Ves didn't feel too much pain, though he still suffered from the discomfort. The interior of the stealth crawler simply didn't offer enough room for the three of them! The increase in gravity only amplified their suffering, but everyone tried to bear it in their own way.

Both Calabast and Ketis seemed surprised that Ves didn't show any signs of further pain and discomfort. They figured him to be a weak-bodied mech designer. His transhuman physique came in handy this time.

Ketis suffered the most, but her genetic modifications allowed her to hang on without fainting or suffering any other ill effects.

As for Calabast, she showed nothing but stoic determination at their circumstances. It was as if the heavy gravity formed a minor hindrance to her. Ves was really curious to know how far her body's parameters exceeded the baseline human norm.

No one asked each other's secrets, though. Everyone bore the heavy gravity in total silence, as if afraid that a single word might attract the attention of the enemy mech.

Only a handful of passive sensors remained active, allowing those inside the crawler to see a glimpse of the mech hunting for stragglers.

As soon as the mech came into view, Ves and Ketis widened their eyes.

"That's the Belisarius!"

The appearance of Venerable Foster's expert mech shook the both of them.

This was a supremely advanced mech with the power to withstand the attacks of several mech companies at a time!

Yet it was also a highly complex mech that incorporated countless advanced system. How could it recklessly appear in the red zone where the breakdown effect did its best to wreck all kinds of technology?

The dreaded Belisarius walked out into view and held a new laser carbine in a casual grip. It seemed that Venerable Foster was leisurely hunting for pirates.

Miss Calabast sighed. "I can't believe the two of you are so blind. Think about what the Belisarius is made of. Are you still surprised that it's able to function this close to the Starlight Megalodon?"

"Rorach's Bone!" Ves uttered. This wondrous exotic's main property was to bestow regenerating properties to anything it's blended with. "A normal mech accumulates an increasing amount of stresses and faults that will slowly cascade into a mechanical breakdown. Yet a mech like the Belisarius is constantly repairing those stresses and faults as soon as they pop up, preventing them from building up to a breakdown!"

Ketis looked dazed at that revelation. "Isn't that a massive cheat? That's so unfair! How can a mech like this show up on Seven! None of our breakdown-proof mechs can last a single second against the Belisarius!"

The magnitude of this revelation stunned Ves and Ketis as they continued to think over the implications. Such a mech being able to operate in the red zone

with impunity would be able to stomp over any other mech no matter how well they were designed.

That was because the Belisarius wasn't bound by the limitations imposed by the environment!

The only entities that could ever stand a chance against the Belisarius was a sacred god. This wasn't good news for the Flagrant Swordmaidens that went in first. Qilanxo may be a powerful sacred god, but her abilities leaned towards defense. A capable expert pilot like Venerable Foster wouldn't be so stupid to let the lumbering Qilanxo whack the Belisarius with its limbs.

"Don't worry." Miss Calabast soothed them. "While I'm not too clear on the details of the safe zone, it's not so easy to shake off its shackles. Even if the Belisarius steps inside the range of the Starlight Megalodon, the battleship will surely restrict it from massacring those already inside."

"How do you know that?" Ves asked pointedly as the Belisarius continued to search the surroundings without any result. "You're quite well-informed about what is going on over there."

Miss Calabast grinned despite the deathly threat roaming just a few hundred meters away. "It's my job to know things, kid. You may be someone of some stature in the mech industry, but you have no idea what someone in my field is capable of. The secrets of the Starlight Megalodon aren't completely inaccessible to me. You just need to have the right capabilities."

She had a point. Ves knew little to nothing about spycraft or whatever Miss Calabast specialized in. He did not have an affinity for this kind of murky business.

Yet his continued entanglement in these matters prompted him to do something about this deficiency. He realized that if he ever wanted to go

anywhere in the future, he would need to recruit someone who could take care of these matters on his behalf.

The idea of forming a shadow force as a hidden counterpart to his personal force gained a higher priority. Still, even the best-laid plans could go to waste without a good leader at the helm. After all of his ordeals, Ves knew that selecting the right people for the right position mattered enormously.

Where could he find a trustworthy spy to lead his shadow force in the future?

And did a trustworthy spy even exist in the first place?