

### Chapter 951 Side Deal

Ves and Commander Dise spent more than an hour in the Jaded Sword's conference room. Amidst the trophies, flags, banners and other impressive artifacts, the two haggled two concurrent deals at once.

A confluence of interests sped the negotiations up. The Vandals and Swordmaidens both suffered heavy damage from the mission so far and wouldn't turn their backs to additional help.

The key was to make a credible agreement that provided plenty of incentives for both sides to stick to the deal. While Ves mainly negotiated on behalf of the Vandals, he also tried to make sure the Swordmaidens had no reason to renege on the deal once they thought it over.

Overall, Ves faithfully stuck to the points and priorities laid out by Major Verle. No matter what, he needed to forge an attractive enough deal for Major Verle to show off to his superiors. As long as this deal provided sufficient benefits to the Bright Republic, the decision makers who possessed the final say would definitely be more inclined to put their stamp on the agreement.

Of course, alongside the public deal, Ves was much more interested in hammering out the details of their private deal.

"Right now, you Swordmaidens lack a competent Journeyman Mech Designer." He began when they drifted to this topic. "Having benefited from Mayra's presence all these years, I'm sure you know what kind of benefits a genuine Journeyman can provide to your organization. While I'm not able to take over her role and provide the same level of services as she once did, I'm more than open to lending a hand every now and then in exchange for favors."

The bald and dark-skinned commander smiled warily at him. "Favors can be expensive and hard to pay back. What kind of favors do you have in mind, Ves?"

This was the point where Ves laid out his demands. For now, he didn't dare ask for anything too major. Their partnership still needed to go through a lot of time and successful cooperation before he could reveal his ambitions for the frontier.

"First, I want you to represent my business interests in the Faris Star Region. More specifically, I want the Swordmaidens to act as a secret channel to the various black markets and other exchanges open to pirates. There are a lot of rare exotics and other valuable goods that are hard or almost impossible to come by in civilized space. Even if they are available, all the middlemen involved will usually balloon the base price by five to ten times. I want a more direct channel to the frontier's most valuable exports."

Commander Dise didn't seem surprised that Ves started with this demand. "We can do that, for a price. Obtaining these kinds of hot goods and smuggling them to your hands will take a lot of effort."

The exact commission they agreed on was rather tentative and subject to change, but it definitely made it worthwhile for the Swordmaidens to fulfill his needs.

Ves knew he'd be better off paying a generous commission to the Swordmaidens rather than access any of the black markets he could access in civilized space.

With the Swordmaidens, he'd be able to purchase his goods from the source or at least close to it. In contrast, those markets and exchanges in places like the Harkensen System truly charged exorbitant prices for the same goods and services!

Not only did the middlemen needed to be paid for all the risks they took, separate organizations probably already reserved much of the good stuff for themselves at preferential rates.

This left the black market vendors at the very end of the chain with only a fraction of what had been obtained at the source. Demand for it hadn't changed, but the supply of it was much less. Raising the original price by a hundred or even a thousand times wasn't out of the question!

Nonetheless, while Ves valued this clandestine black market channel, he wanted more out of this relationship with the Swordmaidens.

The opportunity to forge ties with an established pirate organization didn't come every day! More than that, the Swordmaidens incurred significant losses and experienced a lot of upheavals at the moment.

They needed help. A lot of help. It wouldn't be easy for them to recover decades-worth of accumulation. In order to rebuild the Swordmaidens in a timely manner before their old enemies ganged up on them, they urgently needed a helping hand.

The main deal that Ves just closed with the Swordmaidens was the first helping hand. The secondary deal that Ves currently tried to make was the second helping hand.

Two hands were more than enough to lift the Swordmaidens back to their feet.

"Aside from opening up a channel for me and my company, I also want you to act as guides and escorts to any mech forces I send into the frontier." Ves stated, proceeding to his second demand. "It would be a similar arrangement with the Vandals right now. If I ever need something significant done in the frontier, I won't ask you to do them in my stead. I'll instead send my own forces, if I have any. Your role would be to guide them to their destination and let them do their thing before escorting them back to the border."

Commander Dise appeared much more hesitant about such an arrangement. "This isn't unheard of, but it depends on whether my Swordmaidens are available. While we know the lay of the land and we can depend on our name and friendships to get us by, we also have a lot of enemies as well. Your forces might get caught up in our own troubles."

"I'll take the risk. I believe in your sincerity. What I truly need from the Swordmaidens is your reputation and standing among the local bullies in the frontier. It will save my forces a lot of time and effort if they can avoid needless fights and reach their destination without stepping on the toes of other pirates."

Because Ves did not intend to draw upon this service until several years later, the two quickly agreed to this commitment on a trial basis.

"Are there any other desires you wish for us to fulfill?" Dise asked. Though she didn't seem too enthused about indulging Ves, for the sake of money and skilled mech designer support she seemed willing to hear him out.

Going into bed with someone like Ves who survived the same harrowing experiences as her was a lot better than doing business with some stuck-up business who never stepped foot in the frontier! At the very least, Ves had proven himself worthy of their trust!

"Perhaps in the future, I'd like something done in the frontier. For example, eliminate a specific outfit or expedition that's inconvenient for me or my forces to be associated with the deed. Having the Swordmaidens take care of these dealings without leaving behind a trail that leads back to me is something I would definitely be appreciative of. It's even better if you can fool another pirate gang into doing the job instead."

"I see." Commander Dise said as she crossed her arms. Her various beast bones and trophies jingled with the motion. "I won't say no, but..."

"I understand. It is risky and it might incur enemies to the Swordmaidens. However, we can definitely negotiate the prices for this service."

Like the other points, they didn't set more than a vague baseline. The exact price Ves needed to pay to get the Swordmaidens to 'take care' of a force in the frontier depended on the strength of their targets and the risks they incurred when attempting the deed.

Ves expected that killing a small force would already cost him hundreds of millions of credits while taking care of a larger force would easily force him to cough up more than a billion credits.

For some foes, this service was more than worth the hefty price tag.

It was unfortunate that Ves couldn't arrange the Swordmaidens to 'take care' of some of his domestic enemies. The Swordmaidens generally kept their noses clean in civilized space in order to retain their ability to cross over the border and access the Harkensen System.

"Anything else?"

"This is something a bit more personal to Ketis. It's not a demand per se." He said before turning to the young mech designer who mostly turned dizzy by all the negotiations so far. "Ketis, I think it's best you return with me to civilized space and come work for my company for a time."

She immediately shook her head. "I know that's what Mayra want, but the Swordmaidens really need my help. They can't do without a mech designer!"

"Many pirate gangs manage fine without one. As a Novice, you really don't bring too much benefits to the Swordmaidens at your current state. The deal I'm hammering out with Commander Dise will allow them to draw upon my assistance from remote, which is a lot better than anything you can do in person."

"Even so, I'm perfectly fine with the Swordmaidens as is. There's no reason for me to run off to civilized space."

"I disagree. Haven't you benefited from my tutelage already? How far do you think you'll be able to go in your career when I'm gone? The frontier is already an extremely poor and difficult place for a mech designer to progress and advance. At best, you'll be able to advance to Apprentice in a decade, but what then? It takes more than determination to reach Journeyman."

His words struck a mark. Ketis wordlessly blinked at Ves. She knew enough about her capabilities that it was extremely unlikely for her to ever match Mayra's prowess without any assistance.

Mayra herself lucked out when she caught the Skull Architect's attention, but Ketis failed to spark his interest. Ves also suspected that there was much more to Mayra's background than met the eye. She was way too refined compared to the rest of the Swordmaidens to have started off as a nobody from the frontier.

The key here was that Ketis lacked the various advantages and opportunities that Mayra enjoyed in the past.

Now that Ves, a skilled mech designer who she held in high regard, offered to be her new mentor, she'd be a fool to refuse!

Yet she still hesitated due to her strong affection and loyalty to the Swordmaidens!

Seeing that Ves couldn't break past Ketis' inner struggle, he instead turned to the other Swordmaiden in the room.

"Commander Dise, please think it over. You can easily pick up a random exile or refugee mech designer from the frontier to meet your basic needs. In the meantime, I can take Ketis back to civilized space where she'll be able to

progress by leaps and bounds under my mentorship. Wouldn't the Swordmaidens be better off with a future Journeyman taking the reins again?"

Dise gazed suspiciously at Ves. "That is awfully generous of you, but I can't help but question why you insist on bringing Ketis out of the frontier."

"It's Mayra's last wish." Ves shrugged nonchalantly, at least outwardly. "She's also a mech designer with promise, though she'll need active guidance in order to bloom her potential. If nothing else, consider my tutelage to be another form of payment for your services."

In truth, Ves wanted to bring Ketis under his wings for two other reasons.

First, he trusted her. He would be able to reveal some of the secrets related to the Mech Designer System to her like the attribute candies and she wouldn't ask too many questions. Her gratitude to him for all the help he provided was the strongest assurance that she wouldn't turn against him anytime soon.

Second, grasping Ketis meant that Ves would be intimately connected to the Swordmaidens. While he'd never be a part of them, the chances of betrayal would drastically decrease as long as Ketis studied under him. She was basically a disguised hostage in this regard!

Even if she eventually finished her studies and returned to the frontier to become the head designer of the Swordmaidens, her close and unforgettable ties to Ves would ensure their continued cooperation.

Fulfilling Mayra's last wish was just a convenient excuse to Ves. What he really wanted was to get the Swordmaidens on his side on a permanent basis!

After all, as long as he continued to grow in power and wealth, it wasn't out of the question for him to displace their original backers one day...

### **Chapter 952 Friends**

Having encountered many different pirate outfits, Ves knew that a trustworthy one practically didn't exist.

The value of the Swordmaidens was that they cared about their reputation for honesty. While this didn't rule out the possibility of betrayal, Ves nonetheless felt much more confident about going into bed with them than with any other gang of pirates.

If Ves let this opportunity to hitch his wagon onto the Swordmaidens go, then he would have to approach some other pirate outfit to do business with the frontier. Without a shared history of fighting and working together, and without approaching a pirate gang that used to be strong but was temporarily down on their luck, he would never obtain such good conditions for a private, under-the-table deal.

Certainly, even though he figured he got off rather cheap, maintaining a relationship with the Swordmaidens could easily cost him billions of credits a year, so the deal he just secured wasn't cheap in absolute terms.

However, Ves believed the business opportunities that opened up with this deal would more than pay back his investment.

While he might not be able to apply rare exotics to any of the LMC's standard mech models due to issues with explaining how he obtained them in the first place, they were enormously useful in designing custom mechs.

While he already had a lot of designs on his plate, he did not intend to neglect the top end of the market. Customized, high-quality mechs took a lot of time and effort to design, but it earned Journeyman Mech Designers a lot of fame and reputation if they became known for delivering hot mechs.

The more extravagant and powerful the custom mech, the more he and his products entered the news cycle.

Publicity and exposure was key to building his brand and gaining a higher profile without dumping in billions of credits each year on marketing.



Ves quickly shook his head to get his mind off the future. Right now, he was just laying the groundwork for his future ascension. Rather than fantasizing about advancing his career, he should go back to trying to survive the return trip!

"I believe that's all?" He asked.

"There are no more issues to address." Commander Dise said.

After wording and enumerating the two agreements on separate data pads, they shook hands as well, though it didn't have any greater meaning as of yet. Only after Ves returned to the Shield of Hispania and have Major Verle sign off the main agreement would the deals truly be closed.

Of course, some words in a virtual documents and a cheap handshake didn't mean the deals would pan out. There was no way anyone could enforce contracts made with pirates.

In fact, if Ves arrived at the Jaded Sword with just the deal on behalf of the Flagrant Vandals and the Bright Republic, Commander Dise would have probably doubted their sincerity.

The Swordmaidens would have to incur the burden of protecting the Flagrant Vandals while crossing the entire frontier. Yet their payment only came afterwards and it was a question whether the Bright Republic would honor this agreement in the first place.

What pushed Commander Dise into accepting it was because Ves wanted to close another deal at the same time. Not only did he show sincere intention into cooperating with the Swordmaidens, he also promised to 'compensate' them in the future if the Bright Republic reneged the main deal for some reason.

However, with Ves clearly aiming to build a closer relationship with the Swordmaidens, they felt a bit more assurance that both of the deals would be

honored. This was because it benefited everyone involved if they played along. Achieving a win-win condition was the most secure kind of deal that they could make.

After they chatted a bit, Ves made to leave, but Ketis called for him before he left. "Wait a moment! Dise, tell him about the backup we arranged."

For a moment, Commander Dise glared at her. "You're not supposed to know that."

"Heh. I can't help it if I overhear some things using the sensors of my fancy new armor." Ketis grinned and knocked her gauntlet on her piratized CFA combat armor. "I know Ves has a way of blocking electronic devices from listening in. We just made a deal with him, maybe we should ask him for one."

Ves raised his palm. "Ah, I only have a single signal jammer for now. With the resource shortages we're suffering through right now, I don't think I can make a signal jammer that's effective enough to block out the sensors of her CFA combat armor. By the way, what's this about a backup plan?"

Even though Commander Dise glowered at them both, somehow Ketis' puppy eyes softened her up a bit. The new leader of the Swordmaidens sighed.

"You aren't supposed to know this, but Commander Lydia left a lot of plans behind. One of them involves calling in favors to gather a large number of friendly pirate outfits to meet us halfway. Once we enter their embrace, there are hardly any enemies that can muster the numbers to defeat us all. It's how we deter most enemies when they pursue us, actually."

Ves widened his eyebrows. He knew how significant such a plan would be, especially to the Flagrant Vandals who didn't owe anything to the pirates.

"What would have happened to the Vandals if we jumped into a system with half-a-dozen or more of your 'friends'?"

"Well, who can say?" Dise smiled coyly at him. "It's very hard to control our friends, you know?"

This meant that the possibility of stabbing the Flagrant Vandals in the back definitely entered her mind!

Right now, the remnants ships and mechs of the Vandals and Swordmaidens roughly matched in strength. Once the balance of power tilted decisively to one or another, it would be hard to say if either of them remained staunch allies.

After all, each of them retrieved a lockbox from the Starlight Megalodon. The temptation to snatch the other lockbox away from their erstwhile 'allies' should have crossed their minds all the time.

If not for taking the initiate to propose a deal to Major Verle, thereby allowing him to visit the Jaded Sword to negotiate several deals in person, Ves would not have been aware of this looming disaster to the Flagrant Vandals!

Ves threw a grateful smile at Ketis. Even though she was a Swordmaiden, she cared about Ves and didn't want to see the Vandals and the Swordmaidens at odds for that reason.

All the effort he put into nurturing her so earnestly already paid off in spades.

He turned back to Commander Dise. "Now that we have made some deals to cooperate in the long-term, I suppose you'll put in a good word for us?"

"I'm sure that can be arranged. My friends are your friends."

"How certain are you that your 'friends' will still stay friends even in your weakened state?"

"Because they're our friends." Commander Dise smirked. "To an outsider like you, all pirates are scum who would kill their own mothers for money. That's not how it goes."

Ketis nodded. "I already told you about this, Ves. Our friends will stick with us just like we stuck with them when they fell into a bad patch. We independents have to cover each other's backs if we don't want to get eaten up by the pirate blocs."

Certainly, if the small, independent pirate gangs constantly preyed on each other, they would only pave the way for the rise of the Dragon Alliance and the Ravienne Alliance. Yet Ves couldn't quite wrap his head around pirates helping each other sincerely.

"Just trust us. We pirates have each other's backs."

"Not enough to help you rebuild, I guess." Ves observed.

"That's true." Dise admitted. "Solidarity doesn't extend to charity. Each of us has to show that they are able to stand strong in the frontier through their own efforts."

Ves caught the implication of her words. "It's not a problem to your friends if you fell into a rough patch and lost your strength. However, if years have gone by and you haven't been able to get stronger, it's questionable if your friends still have your backs."

"That's why these deals are really important to us, Ves." Ketis emphasized.

"We need a lot of money. We used to get by with a large mech force, but now that we are like this, it's not so easy to earn as much money."

"In the frontier, your power and might directly affects your earning potential. With more mechs and more ships, you can go after much more lucrative scores." He surmised.

After the meeting ended, Ves returned to the Vandal shuttle and returned to the Shield of Hispania. He met up with Major Verle and handed over the data pad containing the deal he negotiated with the Swordmaidens.

Verle read through the entire document line by line. He didn't miss any detail. After he finished reading through the document, he put the pad down.

"The deal you've negotiated is relatively complete and covers all the points my superiors might find interesting enough to put their stamp on it. The only aspect I'm concerned about is the price we have to pay for the services. Aren't you being a bit too generous on this front? I know you're intimate with the Swordmaidens. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you are allowing them to rip us off."

"The prices are subject to adjustment depending on the services they provide, sir." Ves mentioned. "Besides, if you hear what I have to say next, I think you'll be glad that the Swordmaidens received a deal that's slightly to their benefit."

When he briefly brought up the Swordmaiden backup plan, Major Verle instantly turned grave. "Are you absolutely certain that they have called upon their pirate allies to meet them up in the frontier?"

"I don't think they are bluffing, sir. I already know that they are very well-connected among the independent pirate community. The lie detector module integrated in my Squalon also tells me that they are likely telling me the truth."

While Major Verle still expressed some skepticism, he couldn't afford to discount the possibility. A good leader wouldn't pretend that an awful outcome wouldn't come true just because they didn't like it. At least they became aware of what the Swordmaidens had in store.

"It's not all that bad, sir." Ves consoled the major. "They informed us of their backup plan ahead of time. This shows that they'll probably honor our new agreement and extend their protection to us. All we have to do is to pay them back. They are truly starved for cash and resources right now, and that is what we can depend upon for them to uphold their end of the deal."

Now that Verle thought about it, Ves did make some sense. While the deal paid a fairly high price for certain services, that didn't mean the Bright Republic would scoff at it. More options for engaging with the frontier was always worth it as it was hard to find reliable partners.

The promise of earning a handsome sum ensured the Swordmaidens wouldn't be tempted to betray them in order to make a quick but short-term profit.

Ves raised another point. "I have something else to add, sir. Commander Dise didn't tell me this, but I get the idea that the Swordmaidens aren't very content with their current backers. Right now, they have an opportunity to please their backers if they manage to snatch our lockbox from our hands. However, I don't think they're inclined to do so as long as they don't value their relationship with their backers."

"Hmmm, but you have no proof is this, right?"

"Mayra, their Journeyman Mech Designer who went missing in action, expressed some dissatisfaction towards finding out that the Swordmaidens are actually beholden to some powerful entity in civilized space. I get the idea that not many Swordmaidens knew about this connection in the first place. The fact that this mission led them to being used up until they only have three ships left is bound to alienate them against their backers even further."

"It's a good thing then that they aren't pining to exert their utmost in satisfying their backers, then." Major Verle smiled in a strained manner. "Did they tell you where they are meeting their friends?"

"No sir, but their first destination is to reach a specific star system that's still within the deep frontier. They hid a backup ship there that's loaded with some supplies as well as a working quantum entanglement node. Once the Swordmaidens retrieve the ship, they can call ahead to their friends to prepare a welcoming party."

"Right. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to ask if we can borrow their comm connection to call ahead."

The Flagrant Swordmaidens permanently shut down most of their quantum entanglement nodes and lost the remainder due to the spacetime distortion in the Aeon Corona System. This left them without any means of calling for help!

### **Chapter 953 Transhuman Angs**

If the Vandals and Swordmaidens regained their ability to access the galactic net and communicate with the rest of the galaxy, they could do a lot.

Even if the Comm Consortium and many others listened in to their conversations and data transmissions, it would still be fine as long as Major Verle managed to relay a brief message to his superiors in the Bright Republic.

Just like how the Swordmaidens called upon their friends to back them up, the Vandals would also be able to muster up some help.

The only difference between the two was that help from the pirates would arrive much faster by dint of their proximity. Any help the Bright Republic could offer would be limited by the fact that they could only draw upon assets from home, which was very far away from the frontier.

Therefore, the crucial point in the coming month for the Vandals was to stay in the good graces of the Swordmaidens.

This was the most precarious situation the Verle Task Force ever came across! As long as they crossed over this difficult hurdle, the remnants of this once-great mech force would return home soon enough.

In the next couple of hours, the Vandal and Swordmaiden vessels successfully escaped the envelopment of the pirates attempting to corner them. The hole blown open by crippling the Finmoth Regal's mobility

successfully allowed them to fly to the edge of the star system without bumping into any other human opposition.

As for the sandmen, they mostly congregated towards Aeon Corona VII for some unfathomable reason. Those close to human ships attempted to hunt them down if possible, but such chases mostly went nowhere.

Some human vessels already managed to escape this cursed star system!

Due to the weird behavior of the sandmen, no one wanted to stick around in this star system any longer than they had to! Beside the Dragons of the Void, every other force just wanted to get as as soon as they could before they all got swamped by a swarm of sandmen ships!

As Ves sat in his office and called up the long-ranged scanners pointed towards Aeon Corona VII, he wondered in his head if this was all Sigrund's doing.

He had the feeling that Sigrund attempted to take control over his fellow sandmen. While the hybrid AI managed to draw the motherships towards him, taking control of them was easier said than done.

If Sigrund already managed to co-opt the sandman motherships, then he would have certainly sent them all out to hunt down all the escaping human ships!

The less humans made it out, the lower the chance that his existence would be exposed! It was already bad enough that the ships that just jumped out of the Aeon Corona System.

As half a day went by, the remnant fleet finally managed to cross the point where the system's gravity finally fell below the danger threshold.

[ALERT! FTL TRANSITION IS IMMINENT!]



The surviving crew all prepared for the activation of the FTL drives. After locking everything down and securing themselves into place, the Shield of Hispania and all the other ships successfully transitioned into FTL.

Practically the entire crew and refugee Vandals aboard the combat carrier erupted into a spontaneous cheer!

"Yes! We're finally out of this goddamn dangerous star system!"

"We're safe! We're safe! We're safe!"

"This calls for a celebration! Let's head to the ship's bar and drink until we pass out!"

A palpable sense of relief overcame every Vandal as they finally put down their guards for the first time in months.

To some, this respite gave them the opportunity to come to terms with losing so many of their fellow comrades. Not only did they lose virtually every member of the ground forces, they also lost the majority of their space forces as well.

To others, the temporary reprieve allowed them to relax their shoulders and unwind in order to forget their worries. Many Vandals started to drink, gossip, gamble and even entered into fistfights against each other.

In general, the security officers mostly allowed the unruly Vandals to vent and decompress even if they became a little bit too rowdy. The Shield of Hispania picked up way too many Vandals, and concentrating so many people together in a single ship was bound to lead to problems.

Ves watched on as Vandals did their best to... cope. He found that word fit the current circumstances best. All of them incurred some trauma or another in the Aeon Corona System, and they couldn't be more jubilant when they finally exited this blasted place.

Even Ves felt as if he needed to do something else. However, he didn't feel the need to lose control like the rest.

He chalked it up to his vastly altered body and mental states. "All the genetic treatments are at least good for something."

The documentation left behind in his CFA comm told him little about the concrete effects. They only vaguely explained that the gene optimization treatments would improve his human nature in a comprehensive and holistic manner.

How this actually translated into benefits differed from person to person. These benefits also affected more than more concrete and measurable variables such as his lifespan, immune system, energy intake and muscle and bone strengthening.

As he projected a mirror image of himself in front of him, Ves studied his appearance and noted that despite the faint increase in maturity, he also transformed in many other ways.

"I don't look all that different, but there's something about me that gives a different charm now."

Besides his maturation and his increased confidence in himself, he also exhibited that transcended human quality that made it obvious that he went through many augmentations.

He would never be mistaken for an average baseline human. Ves found that to be a little bit annoying. Even if he thought he looked a little more dashing than before, he would rather prefer to look plain and unassuming.

The more people underestimated him, the more they wouldn't look too closely into the secrets he tried to hide.

"Still, it's not as if looking distinct is all that bad."

As a mech designer who presided over his own company, Ves was well aware of the power of the cult of personality. A distinctive-looking mech designer attracted much more media attention and became a lot more memorable to the public.

While a part of him deeply disliked adopting a high profile, he knew that it would be necessary to step into the limelight in order to grow his business.

These days, a mech designer wouldn't be able to stand out from the pack just by designing good mechs.

As Ves mentally tallied up all the changes the medical procedures caused, he focused foremost on his mind.

He didn't think his mentality changed all that much, but his cognitive functions definitely improved. His thoughts came a little faster, he memorized everything he read a little more thoroughly and generally felt as if he could subject his mind to a bit more pressure.

"I know know exactly how much better I am at thinking, but it is sure to be substantial."

The CFA's gene optimization treatments mainly aimed to improve the performance of their officers. This was one of the key methods of maintaining their superiority over every other human organization in human space. Everyone knew that CFA spacers were significantly better than baseline humans in almost every aspect!

Ves wished he had access to the System so that he could call up his Status to find out how much his Attributes actually increased. In truth, he didn't expect too much of an increase considering he already augmented his mind to a very major degree.

These heavy changes didn't leave too much untouched areas where the gene optimization treatment could provide a measurable improvement to his cognitive functioning.

"Nonetheless, every little bit adds up."

The only downside to these drastic changes was that he didn't entirely feel comfortable in his own skin. The rushed treatments and the lack of structured therapy and adjustment left Ves flailing on the move sometimes.

At some quiet moments, Ves even felt as if his own body started to reject him. Other times, he was caught with the impulse of rejecting the abomination that his body became.

He never asked to be operated on by an insane exiled doctor from the Five Scrolls Compact. Yet that incident irrevocably set him on the path of alien hybridization and genetic modification.

The only reason why he hadn't spiraled into a cycle of self-destructive loathing was because many of the changes brought a lot of benefits, especially recently.

"I'm a transhuman now." He declared. "Since I'm already like this, I should embrace this aspect of myself. There's no point in beating myself up."

Some of his restlessness eased up once he made peace with this issue. No matter how many augmentations and modifications shifted him further and further away from his original state, as long as he remembered his humanity, he wouldn't be at risk of losing the essence that comprised his identity as Ves.

He chuckled to himself. "I think I went over these concerns a lot easier than I ought to. Is this one of the beneficial effects of gene optimization treatments?"

A big part of why the CFA pushed their gene optimization treatments on everyone was because they wanted to avoid the reckless genetic modification

in the past. When leaders became unhinged due to unintended side-effects of enhancing their bodies and minds with alien DNA, they forever stigmatized these kinds of transformations to the public at large.

Ves always thought that humanity stopped dabbling in modifying their own genes and playing with alien traits, but after all he'd been through so far he knew that it had only gone underground and out of sight.

"The need to improve our bodies and minds is too irresistible. How else can we get ahead in our life and careers if we are still average?"

He didn't have a good picture of the extent of human augmentation, but the more he came in touch with the upper echelon of human society, the more he realized how much humans relied on it to get ahead.

The CFA's gene optimization treatment ranked near the top, but many other individuals and organizations probably offered something similar, if not as good.

"Humans are competitive by nature, and there are only a small amount of positions at the top. If I don't try to keep up, I'll forever be left behind."

Ves lamented the hyper-competitive nature of today's society. He realized that a baseline human without any special endowments simply didn't possess the chops to make it far in their lives.

It was at this time someone rang just outside his office. Ves accepted the call on his comm. "Who is this?"

"Mech technician Davis Sollarent." The projection of a middle-aged man's head replied. "There's something I need to discuss with you about the state of our workshops. It's far too crowded there and Chief Haine isn't helping matters along."

Ves frowned at that. "Even if you are dissatisfied with Chief Haine, there are other chief technicians who you can turn to with your complaints."

"All the chief technicians are in it together. Talking to one of them is the same as talking to Chief Haine. Nothing will change."

"Okay, come in then. I'll hear you out at the very least." Ves decided while activating the command to unlock the hatch to his office.

To be honest, Ves really couldn't be bothered with such mundane tasks such as listening to the concerns of a random low-ranking mech technician. Yet he also knew that someone in his position shouldn't ignore any inadequacies with regards to the way the mechs were being serviced, repaired and maintained.

As Davis Solherent nervously entered his office, Ves gestured to the chair in front of his desk. "Please take a seat."

"I would prefer to stand, sir. This won't take long."

Ves shrugged. "Alright. Suit yourself. Please explain why you feel the need to bring up this issue to me. I generally don't involve myself in the running of the workshops."

"I understand." Davis said as his nervousness increased as he got closer to Ves. "It's like this. You should die."

"Oh hell, not again."

Davis whipped out an oversized ballistic pistol from his belt holster and instantly fired a round at his target's head!

#### **Chapter 954 Pain of Loss**

Before Davis even applied pressure to the trigger of his hand cannon, the Squalon already unfolded its helmet and encased the wearer's head.

A powerful round smacked against the visor of the Squalon shortly afterwards. It deflected and pinged off the incredibly resilient surface without leaving behind a single scratch!

To his credit, Davis continued to pull the trigger even after he fired the first round. The powerful hand cannon in his grip didn't possess a high rate of fire, but the mech technician-turned-traitor fired as fast as his sidearm allowed.

As the Squalon's helmet continued to ward off the incoming shots without fail, Ves even had the time to admire Davis' trained shooting posture and accuracy. By far most of the rounds his helmet!

Ves had the impulse of telling the foolish assassin that he would have better luck aiming at the joints of his armor. Even though the back of his elbow and knees likely wouldn't suffer any damage either, Davis should have known better if he was truly a mech technician.

"DIE DIE DIE! WHY WON'T YOU DIE!" Davis raged with sudden fury as his hand cannon clicked empty. Without much pause, Davis changed its magazine and continued to fire more rounds at the mech designer across the desk. "WHAT GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO SURVIVE WHILE MY WIFE DIED A WORTHLESS DEATH ON THE SURFACE!"

Ah. So it was personal. Ves sympathised with fellow all of a sudden. He knew that the Vandals tended to shack up together despite the regulations against fraternization. It was a natural tendency for them to do so after spending years and decades together.

Davis expended four whole magazines worth of ballistic rounds in less than a minute. After firing all of those rounds that could have killed an entire crowd of humans, Ves was no closer to dying and Davis was no closer to venting his grief!

"NO!" The unhinged mech technician despaired as his pistol ran dry. The useless weapon slipped from his grasp. His shaking eyes bore right through the Squalon's undamaged visor. "What gives you the right to live while my wife and friends are all dead?! All of you Vandals are complicit in their deaths! None of you deserve to live!"

Ves strangely retained his calm at the man's violent outburst. Perhaps the knowledge that there was nothing that Davis could do to threaten him in his Squalon gave him the leisure to treat this incident with patience.

"Mr. Sollarent, if that is your name? Ah, I just accessed the personnel files. It seems that much is true about you. Please indulge my curiosity for a moment. Why did you think it would be a good idea to shoot me?"

Davis collapsed to his knees and laughed. "Hahahaha! I didn't think! I didn't think you'd be so tough to kill! Damnit, if I only I brought a plasma cutter to shear my way through your armor! No. That wouldn't work. The chiefs would never allow me to bring out a plasma cutter without permission."

Ves pressed his lips into a thin line. At the beginning, he thought that this entire assassination attempt was part of some grand scheme to sow chaos on the Shield of Hispania. Perhaps a band of traitors and mutineers plotted to destabilize the crew in order to turn them against the brass.

Since the Finmoth Regal mutinied, why wouldn't the Shield of Hispania be any less vulnerable? The entire combat carrier turned into bomb ever since her personnel rolls tripled or quadrupled with the amount of Vandals they absorbed from other ships now doomed to become sandman fodder.

To find out that his killer was just a grief-stricken widower who felt as if the few survivors of the ground expedition didn't deserve to live anymore disappointed Ves. Compared to a scheming, hyper-intelligent foe like Sigrund, this



emotionally unstable mech technician far didn't even register in Ves' danger senses.

"Now that you've got all of that out of the system, I hope you can move past your grief. That is, if the Vandals don't execute you. Have a nice stay in the brig."

The hatch opened up quickly after that to allow a pair of security officers to storm inside. One of them immediately whacked Davis with an electrifier baton which put him out like a light.

The other officer checked the rest of the office for any threats and tried to see if Ves sustained any wounds.

"Mr. Larkinson! Are you injured?!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine." Ves waved away their concerns. "Davis here couldn't have hurt a single hair on my body."

"It's not secure here. Please allow us to escort you to the Security Department."

"Very well. Lead the way." Ves sighed and stood up. While he figured the likelihood of a repeat attack was very low, the security officers would rather that he be safe than sorry.

Half an hour later, Ves just finished recounting the assassination attempt and how pathetic it unfolded. Those involved all looked green with envy as Ves boasted about the quality of his Squalon.

That was genuine CFA armor! Despite the fact that it was merely one of their light combat armor models for field engineers, it nonetheless rendered a hefty hand cannon completely ineffective!

"I'm not even mad." He told the interrogators. "Davis is just someone who snapped. I'm more concerned about others like him. While I'm not that easy to

kill, the same couldn't be said about the others like Captain Orfan or Major Verle."

"We will be adjusting their protective detail in light of this event." The security officer nodded as he typed something in his data pad. "Please answer us. Do you think that Davis Sollarent has an accomplice or is working together with a band of like-minded people?"

Ves sighed. "I already answered this question. No, I don't think he's working with someone. The monitoring system in my office must have recorded the entire event. You can go watch the footage."

"You know how it goes. I have to keep asking, Mr. Larkinson." The security officer said in a respectful manner.

No matter how much Ves understated himself among the Vandals, he couldn't help but become one of the most high-profile individuals on the fleet.

As someone who already assisted the Vandals many times and as one of the two survivors to the ill-fated ground expedition, Ves was bound to attract a lot of attention and respect.

It didn't surprise the crew all that much that a consummate mech officer like Captain Orfan managed to survive the events on the surface. Yet for a noncombatant like Ves to make it out alive when so many others failed to make their way out spoke much about his competence.

Or his cowardice, depending on who you asked.

Nonetheless, a survivor like Ves long left the ranks of average people.

Once the interrogation finally ended, Ves finally received permission to depart, although this time he gained a permanent escort.

Ves let out an exasperated breath at the goon in heavy combat armor stomping his heavy boots against the deck behind his back. "You know I don't

need protection, right? My Squalon is more than capable of shrugging off anything a troublemaker can throw at me. You're better off protecting someone more vulnerable."

"You're a high-profile target, Mr. Larkinson. My presence will deter anyone who is thinking of starting an incident." The security officer responded politely but firmly as he gripped his menacing-looking assault rifle.

Ves looked at himself and his unchanged CFA armor. Even though it clearly bore CFA colors and CFA markings, the average Vandal probably didn't recognize the significance of it. If anyone looked at the Squalon, they would probably mistake it as an unnaturally streamlined suit of light combat armor with a rounded rectangular hump at its back.

Its size, stature and overall appearance looked far too small and modest for the amount of protection it actually offered. The heavy combat armor worn by his security escort looked far more capable and intimidating. This was a heavy, motor-assisted suit of armor with enough armor plating that an average person would strain enormously if they attempted to move in it under their own power.

Yet despite the combat armor's tough and bulky appearance, the security officer was far easier to kill than Ves due to the enormous quality difference in materials and protective technology!

He chuckled at the thought that he was tougher to kill than his guard. It should have been the other way around.

"Can you tell me about the state of unrest and dissatisfaction among the crew of this ship? How many more people like Davis Sollerent are aiming to take me down a notch?"

"Not much, sir." His guard grunted. "We Vandals are better than this. We're soldiers."

"I don't think telling that to yourselves will make that anymore believable. Underneath your discipline and soldierly exterior lies a vulnerable human being that is subject to your own emotions."

"I'm not trained to think about all of that psychological crap. I'm just assigned to guard your life and scare off any scum who think they can kill you under my watch." The guard replied simply.

Ves shrugged. What else could he expect from chatting with a goon?

Since he felt the need for more sophisticated conversation, he diverted from his route to the office and instead headed down to the workshops again. He sought out Chief Technician Haine and asked for another private meeting.

Before he entered her office, he turned to his guard. "Will you be following me in?"

"Orders, sir. I'm not allowed to leave you alone?"

"Even when I'm doing my business in the toilet?"

"I'll wipe your butt for you if I have to." The guard replied humorlessly.

Ves shook his head but allowed the guard to enter the office. In fact, he joined another security guard who had already been assigned to tail Chief Haine.

For some reason, Ves started to become a little more ambivalent to the presence of these guards, especially when they insisted on attending a private meeting between two loyal Vandals.

Did the security officers receive orders to monitor every cadre aboard the ship for reasons other than protection? Were they afraid that mid and high-ranking Vandals would be plotting a mutiny behind everyone's backs?

His levity with regards to the new security arrangements soured at that realization. While he understood the necessity of taking precautions, he found their presence to be insulting as well.

It spoke of a certain lack of trust.

Still, Ves tried hard not to read too deeply into these measures. Besides, he didn't intend to talk about anything too sensitive with Chief Haine in the first place. Nothing that necessitated the activation of his signal jammer.

"Did you want to talk about miscreant Davis?" Chief Haine began with a minor scowl on her face. "That little bastard had always been a loyal Vandal. He wasn't very good at his job, though, but you can say that about half of our mech technicians. Davis is one of those veteran members of our mech regiment, and when he married one of our other mech technicians, none of us saw anything wrong."

"Do you Vandals regularly ignore the rules on fraternization?"

"Sure! Who cares, right?" Haine snorted her nose. "Headquarters is far away, and the Tarry region where we are nominally stationed at is one of the border backwaters of the Bright Republic. Our Vandals shack up, have one night stands, become friends with benefits, and if they're really lucky enough, they meet their soul mates and tie the knot."

"And the Mech Corps never even intervened?" Ves asked with mild amazement.

"What they don't know won't hurt them. It's not as if we file the paperwork. All the marriages between the Vandals are undocumented. You don't need a stinking marriage license to affirm your love to someone."

Ves didn't have any particular opinion about this issue. It seemed par for the course for the Vandals to ignore the expectations of the Mech Corps.

"How many of these 'marriages' have taken place?"

"Oh, quite a lot actually. At least a thousand. Maybe a few hundred more. They span across every position and rank."

Ves saw a problem there. "More than a thousand, you say? How many more examples like Sollerant do you think exist?"

Chief Haine grew grim at that question. "Accounting for all of the losses in our space and ground forces, I'd say there are at least several dozen widows and widowers in our midst."

If all of them lashed out at once, they could do some serious damage to the Shield of Hispania!

### **Chapter 955 Immense Coffin**

Once Ves and Chief Haine ascertained a huge problem in the amount of Vandals who lost their loved ones during the mission, they quickly brought it up to Major Verle.

To his credit, the commanding officer acted fast. Through accessing the records and through informal inquiries, the security officers quickly sought out every serviceman that posed a risk.

While not everyone appreciated being grabbed from their posts or their bunks by some armored goons, most of the crew showed understanding. They already heard about the attempted assassination attempt on Ves. What if these unhinged servicemen lashed out to the people next to them? What if they decided to go out with a bang by sabotaging a core component of the ship?

Within a single day, the security officers took over seventy basket cases into custody. Some resisted. Some even discharged their weapons. None of their resistance made a difference.

By the time the fleet emerged in a quiet star system close to the Aeon Corona System, the Gorgon's Gaze underwent the same upheaval.

As for the Jaded Sword and the two Swordmaiden light carriers? No one heard anything amiss from their ships. The Swordmaidens possessed a much

sterner outlook on matters of life and death. Their harsh training along with the realities in the frontier already inured them against tragedies.

"If only the Vandals are as mentally resilient as the Swordmaidens."

If the surviving Vandals all underwent the mental resilience training sessions that Ves had devised on the ground, perhaps they wouldn't be so susceptible to their darker thoughts. Yet almost no one except Captain Orfan survived.

Having spent a long time working and fighting alongside the Vandals, he became intimately familiar with their good and bad points.

Ves liked them for their relaxed, liberal, tolerant and inclusive nature towards the conduct of their own men and women.

Yet compared to proper soldiers such as the Larkinson veterans that he often interacted with back on Rittersberg, the Vandals also seemed to fall short in many ways. Being treated as damaged and abandoned goods by the Mech Corps at large depressed their confidence and made them feel as if no one appreciated their earnest efforts.

This actually posed a huge threat to the Vandals whenever they suffered a major loss. In ordinary circumstances, the Vandals would never be involved in high-risk operations like this, so that was also why they were a bit slow on the uptake this time.

Fortunately, Major Verle moved quickly enough to take out the risk factors and made several moves to stabilize the morose morale that began to engulf the Vandal ships.

The most important measures to provide closure to the Vandals was to rush the military funeral ceremony.

Same as last time, the crew aboard the Shield of Hispania almost all filed into the largest mech hangar bay. Projections of the crew of the Gorgon's Gaze appeared in their midst as well.

Previously, the projections of the crews of the other ships had to be shrunk in size to make room for all the Vandals.

All the losses they suffered made that measure redundant. This only further emphasized that the Vandals lost many thousands of their own people.

The huge disparity made the hangar bay seem so empty and hollow.

Ves stood solemnly besides Chief Technician Haine and Chief Engineer Avanaeon. Shortly after his return from his negotiation session with Commander Dise, he realized that it would be inappropriate to continue wearing CFA colors and insignia.

He personally paid a visit to the armory and asked Chief Mandelsen to recoat his custom XV-99 Squalon in the dark green colors denoting his status as a mech designer in the service of the Mech Corps.

The new paint job covered up and removed the lieutenant commander insignia and all of the other symbols associated with the CFA. In their stead came the insignia that stood for his current position as head designer, technically temporary, and the sigil of a burning city that stood for the Vandals.

"You look a lot better now in your new colors. I don't feel as if I'm within the company of a poncy CFA officer now." Chief Avanaeon remarked quietly as Vandals kept pouring into the hangar bay.

Ves smiled at him. "CFA officers aren't as bad as they seem. They are only rather stuck up in the presence of space peasants."

"Is that how you see us now that you've ascended into their exalted ranks?"



"Don't joke with me, chief. I'm still a citizen of the Bright Republic. I won't be picked up by the CFA anytime soon."

The banter quickly died down as soon as everyone filed into ranks. In contrast to the last major funeral ceremony, only a single space coffin rested in the center.

In a major deviation from standard protocol, the Vandals who fashioned the coffin amplified its size by more than a dozen times. Ves heard that the coffin had actually been fashioned out of scrapped mech parts!

Such a huge coffin covered by the black-and-burgundy colors of the 6th Flagrant Vandals imposed a suffocating presence on the people present.

The ceremony started with a trumpet and a band of musicians playing a solemn tune. This helped up everyone in the appropriate mood.

When Major Verle finally stepped up to the raised podium, not a single Vandal showed any unruliness.

"This coffin resting before you stands for those we lost at Aeon Corona VII. Many of our fellow brothers and sisters will never see the light of the galaxy again, but are instead buried forever on the surface or in orbit of that deadly, forbidden planet."

The man spoke on for ten whole minutes. His simple, unpretentious speech lacked the usual tricks and wordplay intended to pump up everyone's morale. This time, the losses were far too severe for the Vandals to get over them with a single ceremony.

They needed much more time to make peace with the events in the Aeon Corona System. They also couldn't wait until they returned home to start their grieving process.

At the end of the ceremony, antigrav modules pushed the giant coffin out of the hangar bay and into the cold emptiness of space. Eventually, it would drift into the local sun, whereupon it would melt and break down into particles that would one day be turned into new stars or planets.

It wasn't a pompous ceremony, but it forced every surviving Vandal to undergo a period of introspection. The wild and unrestrained celebration of a few days ago had all but disappeared.

They could no longer push off the inevitable. Though morale dipped even lower throughout the ship, Ves saw it as a good thing as it was bound to happen sooner or later. The brass would rather keep it under control than to let every individual Vandal cope with the losses by themselves in a long, strewn-out manner.

"Still, we're not out of the woods yet." Ves said to himself. "We are still well into the deep frontier."

Under the guidance of savvy Swordmaiden navigators, the remnant allied fleet proceeded to transition in a slightly circuitous route back home.

They transitioned into several familiar star systems they once passed by on their way to the Aeon Corona System. However, the navigators also deviated from the route, sometimes landing them in empty star systems and other times interrupting the placid lives of the local sandmen colonies.

The aliens were definitely alarmed by the presence of human ships in their territory!

Fortunately, the Swordmaidens only intruded in the territories of marginal sandmen colonies. The sandmen admirals who patrolled these quiet systems may be numerous, but even a six-year old kid outmatched their intelligence.

Even so, a steady train of sandmen ships trailed after them even through FTL. The slow but persistent pursuit forced the Vandal and Swordmaiden vessels to keep transitioning as soon as their FTL drives finished cycling.

The only good thing about attracting dozens of sandman motherships was that it deterred the Dragons of the Void from continuing the pursuit.

"Haha! Those pirates won't be bothering us now that the aliens want to have their turn first."

"I don't know about you, but attracting all of those sandman motherships makes me nervous. What if they catch up?"

"I'd rather have a hundred stupid sandman motherships than half-a-dozen human pirate vessels on my tail."

Although not everyone agreed to this strategy of provoking and attracting the sandmen to deter their human opponents from continuing the chase, Ves couldn't help but admit it worked.

As long as they avoided attracting an old and highly developed sandman leader, the quicker vessels of the Flagrant Swordmaidens possessed ample confidence to remain ahead of any tagalongs.

More than a month passed by as they both skulked and raced towards the shallow frontier. Everyone slowly resumed their work, and there was plenty to do even if the carriers carried far too much personnel.

At some point, the remnant fleet reached an empty star system close to the Woolox System which hosted the further known human-owned space station in the Faris Star Region.

The Dragons of the Void stood behind that space station, so the remnant fleet had no intentions of dropping into the Woolox System for resupply.

Unfortunately, the remnant fleet really needed to supplement some of their supplies, especially with regards to fuel!

The situation couldn't be more clearer as Ves tallied the overall situation of the two surviving Vandal ships.

"Our supply situation is dire." He inputted into the logs. "In our pressing need to repair as much spaceborn mechs as possible, we've long run out of almost all essential rare exotics and bulk metals. The only critical materials left are reserved to maintain the Shield of Hispania and the Gorgon's Gaze."

He accessed the files that relayed their current fuel and energy supplies.

"Starship-grade fuel is running out and our overall energy reserves are dipping into dangerous territory. The lengthy mission and the route the navigators insisted on following has not been very efficient in terms of fuel usage. The Vandal combat carriers don't even have enough fuel left to make it all the way to civilized space. On the upside, we didn't waste too much time and we should be out of the deep frontier within a week."

Everyone from the inner circle already knew how dire their fuel situation had become. Ves was sure that Major Verle had a plan in mind for that. Perhaps they would be able to obtain some from the pirates or from an independent star station.

Ves turned his attention to the state of the crew. "Morale is low but stable. Many Vandals are simply tired of fighting and just want to get home. I doubt anyone even cares about the war anymore. While everyone still hates the Vesians, they're much too worn out to give a damn about taking revenge. They lack the confidence to win against our mortal enemies."

Their overwhelming defeat against the Meandering Monkeys and the Hostland Warriors in the final ground battle practically scarred the Vandals. While Major Verle did his best to keep the details and the logs about the battle under

wraps, word nonetheless leaked out. The lack of solid details left every Vandal to imagine their own version of events.

It frustrated Ves a bit to see the Vandals so traumatized at the thought of facing the Vesians in battle again. Even the Swordmaidens showed more courage!

"Speaking of the Swordmaidens. Even through my regular chats with Ketis, I don't know what Commander Dise is up to these days. They're still undergoing a transition period. I don't think they're plotting to stab our backs, but we'll see what happens in the future."

One change from the monotonous pattern was that the surviving Swordmaidens finally met up with the backup ship they hid in this unremarkable system.

After the Jaded Sword transmitted an encrypted signal to a specific coordinate in a dense asteroid belt, a small and zippy corvette launched out of a hiding spot within an asteroid.

The corvette that emerged was called the Saffron Poke! While she only served as a courier vessel for the Swordmaidens, the most vital point about this little ship was that she carried a working, functional quantum entanglement node!

The survivors of the Flagrant Swordmaidens could finally reconnect with the galactic net!

### **Chapter 956 Dead Drop Accounts**

Due to the continuing pursuit of the sandman motherships, the remnant fleet couldn't stick around for long. The Swordmaidens made their calls first before the Vandals had their turn.

Of course, they expected no privacy when the Vandals sent various encrypted and nonsensical messages to obscure comm addresses registered all over the galaxy.

Nonetheless, only very few people would be able to decipher the meaning of these messages, and that was sufficient.

Ves knew that Major Verle definitely informed the relevant authorities of their state. What help they would send, he had no clue, but it would definitely come!

Shortly before the remnant fleet with the addition of the Saffron Poke transitioned back into FTL, Ves made a short comm call to the Jaded Sword.

"Hello, Ves. Why did you call me this time?" Ketis asked.

"Can you hook me up to the Saffron Poke's quantum entanglement node? I'd like to send some messages to some of my people back home as well."

She frowned at Ves. "We're not supposed to let individuals access the galactic net. That's bad information security, you know. Major Verle told us to block all individual requests unless they are cleared by him in person."

"Oh come on, Ketis, you know who I am. Would I ever betray the Vandals or exercise poor information security? I urgently need to arrange some personal matters. Please?"

Fortunately, the Swordmaiden mech designer proved to be susceptible to her emotions. She quickly softened at his appeals.

"Okay, I'll take up with Commander Dise. She's the only one who can unlock access to the quantum entanglement node."

After a few minutes of arguing with the new leader of the Swordmaidens, Dise finally allowed Ves access on account of their private dealings.

"I hope you don't abuse your new access." Dise warned him. "It will go very poorly for all of us if you inadvertently lead us into an ambush."

"I know what to do. Don't worry."

Once Ves obtained the authorization codes, he cut off his call to the Jaded Sword and initiated a new call to the Saffron Poke.

After a few seconds of authentication, he finally obtained a connection.

As soon as his CFA comm connected to the galactic net, he didn't get to make his call immediately. Instead, his device locked up and automatically exchanged a host of data to somewhere!

[Redirecting connection to the galactic fleet network... Connection established... Synchronizing data and uploading logs... Checking device versions... Downloading mandatory updates...]

Ves looked at his comm in alarm! It actually connected to the CFA's exclusive fleet network without his say so! This was deeply troubling to Ves because while the connection was shielded by heavy CFA encryption that prevented any snoopers from knowing what he sent, that didn't apply to the CFA themselves!

While Ves wasn't stupid enough to store sensitive data relating to the Vandals or the mission in his CFA comm, he hadn't been able to delete all of the logs.

Fortunately, the CFA practiced extremely good information security, so it never recorded anything in restricted sections. However, that still left it with a couple of logs and records about his forged identity's recommissioning to a missing CFA battleship!

Ves almost felt like vomiting. No matter what buttons he pressed, his CFA comm refused to disconnect. Even activating his signal jammer didn't help because his CFA comm somehow circumvented the interference. It blocked

anything else but the comm's direct connection to the Saffron Poke's quantum communication node, which completely bypassed the regular communication channels of the Shield of Hispania.

The enhanced transceiver built into his Squalon actually possessed sufficient range to stretch out all the way to the corvette! More than that, the quantum communication node's programming treated CFA communications differently from regular communications!

"Damn CFA! Stop hijacking my comm!"

His comm's fast processors rapidly applied the updated software packages despite their size and complexity. While Ves could do nothing about the outdated hardware of his comm, its software experienced a sea of change, bringing it fully up to date!

[Updates completed. Checking for further updates... Downloading mandatory updates for the XV-99... Applying updates... Updates completed. Welcome to the galactic fleet network, Reserve Lieutenant Commander Longhorn. You have pending messages in your inbox.]

Ves looked at the projection of the slick new interface of his CFA comm with a nauseous expression. He lightly poked at it and it didn't seem to have noticed anything amiss nor raised any alarms. He checked the settings of his Squalon and quickly noted many new additions and enhancements.

While he appreciated the updates, he didn't quite know what it meant to him. Surely he couldn't keep pretending to be someone he wasn't? The Starlight Megalodon didn't even exist anymore!

"Hopefully I'll just be forgotten in the crowd. There are billions, if not trillions of CFA personnel and their dependents. Surely they won't pay attention to my entry in their vast network, right?"



While he didn't feel too sure about that, he already spilled the milk. Ves pushed aside his concerns about the implications of this connection and proceeded to follow his original plan.

Due to the forced changes, his updated CFA comm now connected to the galactic fleet network with state-of-the-art encryption at high priority. The galactic fleet network operated outside the regular galactic net operated by the Comm Consortium, which everyone believed leaked like a sieve.

"As long as I don't mind the CFA listening in, the galactic fleet network is probably a lot more secure than the Comm Consortium's net."

After familiarizing himself with the modern interface, he finally managed to send a couple of comm messages to several dormant comm accounts he set up once before. Just like Vandals, Ves prepared his own encrypted communication methods that Calsie, who led the Living Mech Corporation in his stead, and Melkor, who led the Avatars of Myth, regularly checked.

So long as they checked the inboxes of those comm accounts and received his encrypted messages, they'd be able to unlock them in their own ways and find out what Ves demanded of them. If more than a week passed by without opening the messages, the comm accounts automatically removed them from their inboxes.

"Hopefully Calsie and Melkor are capable of following my instructions. I would hate it if the LMC or the Avatars of Myth are affected by the war."

Every company and every mercenary corps needed to pitch in to the war effort in some way. While the Bright Republic didn't treat them as rigidly as their own soldiers, they nonetheless needed to commit to defending the state.

"I should stop now."

While Ves was tempted to explore the galactic net and see if the LMC still did business, he didn't want to keep this comm connection any longer than he ought to. Who knew what this out-of-control CFA comm would do next!

After cutting off the connection, he regained full control over his gear. Ves sighed in relief as he determined his comm wasn't maintaining some covert connection to the Saffron Poke's quantum entanglement node.

As the remnant fleet transitioned into FTL less than fifteen minutes later, Ves tentatively explored all the new updates to his gear. Almost every system of his CFA gear experienced a sea of change in terms of their software.

"At least I don't have to worry about hackers anymore." Ves chuckled without much humor. "On the other hand, I'm pretty sure the CFA can snoop in whenever they want to. It's way too risky for me to continue using this comm. I'll have to mothball it once I get home."

The troublesome part about putting down his CFA comm was that his XV-99 Squalon wouldn't function without authorization, which only that very same CFA comm could provide!

On second thought, Ves probably wouldn't need to wear the Squalon in his daily civilian life. He still possessed the shield generator gifted by Master Olson, and that would be sufficient to protect him from assassination attempts.

"If something awful does happen to me one day, I can always take my CFA gear out of storage and don them again. Compared to a threat against my life, it's not a big deal if the CFA collects some sporadic logs that will probably be thrown into a forgotten database."

He would just have to make sure he never wore any of his CFA gear around the System or any other sensitive secrets. The mandatory updates already spooked him enough about their susceptibility to outside forces and reminded him that every comm connection was inherently insecure.

No wonder someone like the Skull Architect would rather communicate with someone by remote with the use of Tzianti crystals.

With nothing much to do as Ves already delegated most of his responsibilities, he idly explored the new functionality of his comm and Squalon in case he ever needed to call upon them during a crisis. Even if Ves was less than pleased about the forced updates, he couldn't help but admit they substantially improved the performance of his own gear.

"Just software updates can make a huge difference in so many aspects!"

Ves admired the way the new programming streamlined the performance of old hardware and added many new functions. It reminded him of Alloc Brandstad, the Journeyman Mech Designer who went missing in action during the Detemen Operation.

Thinking of Alloc put a dampener on his mood. Although Ves didn't spend much time under Alloc's supervision, it did show him a new appreciation of what a difference good software could make in the performance of mechs.

Ves regretted that he didn't excel in this area. His design philosophy also made it difficult for him to dive deeply in this important field.

As time went past, the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet silently slipped out of the territory of the sandman and crossed back into the so-called 'shallow frontier'. The amount of sandman motherships following behind their FTL transitions dropped sharply.

The sandman admirals who controlled the motherships all learned that it became increasingly dangerous for them if they ever encroached into human space.

Only a handful of sandman motherships didn't get the message, but the Flagrant Swordmaidens hardly concerned themselves with the stragglers.

The only downside about the remaining pursuit was that the Vandals and Swordmaidens couldn't stop to mine an asteroid to replenish some of their dwindling resources.

"This can't go on." Ves observed as he checked the diminishing fuel levels of the Shield of Hispania and the Gorgon's Gaze. "We'll run dry in two weeks or less!"

When Ves brought this issue up with Major Verle during a private meeting, the commanding officer didn't show any alarm.

"We're already on top of our fuel and supply issues, Mr. Larkinson. We've already made arrangements with the Swordmaidens to address all of our problems. Right now, we can't afford any leaks, so you'll have to keep your curiosity to yourself."

"Fine, sir." Ves said, knowing that the major wouldn't tell him anything even if he entered his inner circle. There were some secrets that Verle could never share to anyone. "Let me ask you this. I've been thinking about what you told me last time about the opportunity to retain all of the gear and equipment I've obtained from the CFA."

"Oh? Do tell what you have in mind."

Ves briefly explained his intentions, causing the major to change his expression.

"I don't think my superiors will be pleased with your solution except yourself. However, considering your substantial contributions, I'm inclined to turn a blind eye to your shenanigans."

"Thank you, sir. That's all I ask." Ves said in relief.

"By the way, while I haven't been able to transmit anything too detailed through the Saffron Poke's quantum entanglement node, I already sent a

glowing report about your performance to the relevant institutions. While I'm not entirely certain what's in store for you back home, the Bright Republic aren't misers when it comes to recognizing stellar performance."

"Ah, thank you, sir." Although Ves didn't quite know how this would benefit him in concrete terms, he hoped he at least earned a cushy job in the rear for the remainder of the war.

"I'm telling you this not to stroke your ego, but because we may have need of your earnest efforts one last time." Major Verle stated grimly. "You see, the Swordmaidens received intelligence from their network of allies and friends that the Dragons of the Void are amassing a fast strike force to intercept us before we rendez-vous with friendlies. By all accounts, it doesn't seem likely we can avoid another battle!"

#### **Chapter 957 Shoddy Mechs**

The Dragons of the Void were some of the most persistent and annoying enemies that Ves had ever encountered! Even now, they hadn't given up on intercepting the remnant fleet.

The only consolation was that the remnant fleet barely exited the deep frontier. They currently passed through one of the most desolate areas of the Faris Star Region. Very few outfits made their homes here due to the lack of human presence. Ves figured that sandmen ships still outnumbered human ships this far from the border.

Nonetheless, the Woolox Star System hosted a small space station where a number of dependents of the Dragon Alliance made their home. The Swordmaidens received word that some of those subordinate pirate outfits suddenly mobilized into action and transitioned out of the star system in a hurry!

Not only that, but their destination brought them closer to the route the Flagrant Swordmaidens would likely pass!

As Major Verle informed him of the approaching threat, Ves relax a little bit.

"Just to be clear, sir. It's not the main forces of the Dragons of the Void coming after us, but some hick pirates that became affiliate members of their alliance, right?"

"Correct. Even so, the estimated number of mechs the pirates can muster is of great concern. If their carriers are all filled to the brim with spaceborn mechs, then we can easily expect over two-hundred mechs bearing down on us at once!"

As the head designer, Ves knew quite well how many mechs the Vandals could muster at this time. So far, the mech technicians all exerted their utmost to raise their strength to seventy operational mechs.

The Swordmaidens should be in a slightly better state. So the Flagrant Swordmaidens would probably be able to field a hundred-and-fifty mechs perhaps.

A complicating factor was that the lack of supplies and materials left many of their mechs in a state of disrepair. There was only so much the mech technicians could do to patch up all of the missing and damaged parts!

"Do we know what we're up against, sir?"

"We do. The agents in Woolox who sent word to the Swordmaidens also included every scrap of intelligence they gathered about the outfits arrayed against us. Individually, they're nothing to be concerned about, but together they are a force to be reckoned with. Here is all the information you need."

Ves accepted the data pad that Verle slid over his desk. He browsed the summary and raised his eyebrows. "Kaso's Remediers. Medium pirate gang. Slick hairs. Small pirate gang. Blind men. Small pirate gang. I didn't see these names the last time we visited the Woolox System, sir."

"The pirates that usually take refuge in the Woolox System aren't very well off. They wouldn't be forced to base themselves in the most distant known space station in the frontier if that's the case. Pirates continue to come, but most are never heard of again in time. The sandmen probably got to them. Yet new batches of pirates keep pouring in. From what the agents gathered, the three outfits you mentioned aren't exactly in the best books of the Dragon Alliance."

Ves looked at the number of mechs these pirates could muster. "We're going to have a hard fight on their hands if they managed to corner us and force us into a battle. Is there no way to outmaneuver them and avoid them entirely, sir?"

"The Dragons of the Void doesn't have much of a presence here, but we suspect that they planted many hidden listening posts in the star systems in this area. There isn't much of a chance to keep our route hidden from this strike force. While it is possible for us to take wide detours to prevent their interception, that will waste vast amounts of time, giving the Dragons of the Void enough time to muster up a proper interception fleet from their core territories and send them out to cut off each direction we can take."

In other words, time was of the essence. They needed to get past the obstacle of the Dragon Alliance's fast strike force in order to rendez-vous with the 'friends' of the Swordmaidens.

"What did the Swordmaidens say about the threat? They know our opponents better than we do, sir."

"True. As far as the Swordmaidens are aware of, Kaso's Remediers are the ones to watch out for. Not only are they able to field more mechs than the other two gangs, they also possess a very wide and varied mech roster. Kind of like us, in a way. Much of their mechs are garbage but there are a few notable machines reserved for their officers that can give us a run for our money."

Their modus operandi sounded similar to what the Flagrant Vandals did in civilized space. They excelled at raiding lightly-protected trade convoys and shipping fleets.

Of particular note was that they existed the longest as well, which meant they developed a substantial martial tradition and wouldn't make too many mistakes on the battlefield.

The other two gangs seemed less concerning than the Remediers.

"The Slick Hairs fancy themselves as sophisticated thugs. They're known for how much time they spend on grooming their slick dyed black hair."

"Sounds like they belong in a theater rather than the frontier." Ves snorted.

"It's a gimmick, yes, but it's one that unifies them and brings them together, much like the obsession of swordsmanship among the Swordmaidens." Major Verle replied, taking it much more seriously than most. "The Slick Hairs mostly field a mix of light skirmishers and other assorted cheap mechs. Visually, they've modified their mechs by giving them the same slick hairdos."

As Ves browsed the image captures of the mechs fielded by the Slick Hairs, he had to admit the hairdos gave the mechs a sense of class that they didn't actually deserve. Beneath their slick hairs and polished exteriors, Ves spotted the telltale signs of neglect and faulty repairs.

It reminded him of the shoddy mechs of Walter's Whalers.

Verle turned to the last pirate gang. "As for the Blind Men, they aren't blind. They just call themselves that for reasons I can't be bothered to explain. While their rituals and customs are strange, they are known for their marksmanship. Their spaceborn rifleman mechs are all armed with laser rifles tweaked for power. While their fire rate is rather poor, leading to an awful performance at close range, their rifleman mechs are quite fast."



Overall, three distinct pirate gangs joined forces to intercept the Flagrant Swordmaidens at the request of the Dragons of the Void. While the pirate mechs didn't look impressive, the mechs of the Vandals and Swordmaidens didn't look much better due to lack of supplies.

"I'll take these files and study them to see if I can ascertain their weaknesses." Ves said as he kept studying the details on the enemy mechs. "Almost every mech model in their roster belong to the bottom tier as far as quality goes, so I'm sure I can find some weak points that can be exploited, sir."

"Do your best to make life easier for our mech pilots." Major Verle dismissed him with a wave, evidently not expecting too much from his efforts. "If you have any other ideas that can make our lives easier in the upcoming battle, don't hesitate to bring them up to me. You've already surprised me several times with your suggestions."

"I don't think I can pull another rabbit out of my hat, sir. It's very hard to do things when we're so short on supplies, mechs and manpower." Ves sighed.

"Don't we all know it. Now get out. The battle will start in less than a week according to our projections so make sure you have everything ready."

As Ves departed the stateroom and shuffled back to his office, he began to study the contents of the data pad in greater detail. Having worked with so many damaged mechs due to Aeon Corona VII's breakdown effect, he developed a sense for damage and imperfections in mech frames.

Ves merely had to look at the outward appearance of a random mech for a moment to deduce its major shortcomings. As Ves flitted through images of the pirate mechs on patrol or resting in their mech stables, he gained a broad sense of how each of the pirate gangs treated their mechs.

"Kaso's Remediers has too many mechs but doesn't allocate enough of their budget on mech maintenance and repairs. The Slick Hairs treat their mechs

with much more love, but they are obviously deficient in technical personnel. I'm almost certain they don't have a mech designer presiding over their mechs, and their mech technicians aren't any good. Only the Blind Men are of concern since their mechs seem the most well-maintained of the bunch. The only upside is that they predominantly use the same mech model so that all of them share the same flaws."

All three forces adopted different approaches to their mechs, so Ves needed to treat them separately and in different manners.

As Ves dove into analyzing the mechs, he started with the easiest and most numerous mech roster. Kaso's Remediers seemed to have prioritized the acquisition of any cheap mech they could get their hands on to expand their numbers.

"Much of their mechs are probably second or third-hand wrecks that have been restored to a functional state by shady repair businesses."

Ves spotted the telltale signs of cut corners and inadequate repairs. None of the mechs in the possession of the Remediers would be able to exert more than eighty percent of their peak strength.

"All of these mechs have holes in their current states!"

He enjoyed picking apart each documented mech. All of the analysis that Ves performed would be uploaded to the internal database and be made available for access to the Vandal and Swordmaiden mech pilots in battle.

Their mechs would automatically overlay the weak points that Ves identified as well as supply some advice on how best to exploit them. The Vandals already achieved substantial success with this method before, and they had come to expect this service from their resident head designer.

The only downside to using this approach to Kaso's Remediers was that they didn't make any attempts at standardizing their mech roster at all. They fielded

countless different models spanning over several generations and mech types. The only thing they had in common was that they were all universally cheap!

The intelligence the Swordmaidens passed on also only included footage of half the mechs the Remediers actually owned. This meant that while Ves brutally identified critical faults of half of their mechs, the other half remained completely unknown.

"Oh well. On to the next gang then."

When Ves studied the mechs of the Slick Hairs again, he got the notion that they would make for very good display mechs. Their slick hairdos and dashing paint jobs would have turned them into the perfect mascots for casinos and similar entertainment establishments.

"Even if it doesn't look like they have the help of a mech designer, their style sense is really good if they can make their mechs look so slick and cool."

Nonetheless, appearances mattered less to mechs than performance. Ves already found out that the mechs hid a lot of inadequacies beneath their stylish appearances. Corroded parts, shoddy repairs and more marred the mechs of the Slick Hairs.

It became very easy for him to pick apart the weak points of the mechs of the Slick Hairs. It didn't help that they only fielded a couple of melee mech models.

Once Ves finished with analyzing the mechs of the Slick Hairs, he finally turned his attention to the mechs of the Blind Men.

As he studied their rather decent-looking spaceborn rifleman mechs, he started to experience an uncanny feeling about them. Something about their design seemed awfully familiar to Ves!

"This looks familiar. Very familiar."

A memory of his Crystal Lord Design suddenly sparked in his mind. When he overlaid the mental image of his Crystal Lord over the design of the mechs of the Blind Men, Ves found to his horror that they had a lot of things in common!

"SOMEONE RIPPED OFF MY DESIGN!"

### **Chapter 958 Blue Paradisio**

People copying other people's works happened all the time. Why not? It saved them a lot of time and effort. Instead of trying to reinvent the wheel, why not steal someone else's design of a wheel and thereby save a lot of time and effort that could have been spent on more fruitful activities?

Even Ves did so himself a few times back on Aeon Corona VII. The incentive of ripping off other people's works constantly beckoned to him, and hardly anything held him back from using these shortcuts.

In ordinary circumstances, the MTA's licensing system did a good job of tracking how much other mech designers copied from other designs. Not only that, the MTA automatically allocated an appropriate proportion of earnings to the original designers.

In general, it was cheaper to license an existing design and use those rights to develop a derivative mech model. Mech designers who 'borrowed' elements from other designs in a blatant manner would usually get slapped with a heftier charge afterwards.

The entire point of the licensing system was to legalize the instinctive act of 'borrowing' or getting 'inspired' by the excellent works of others. Before the MTA instituted the licensing system, the mech industry became a wild west of corporate espionage and endless lawsuits about accusations of stealing someone else's designs or ideas.

The patent systems regulating the innovation of each individual state resulted in a horrible mess of endless litigation and confusion as different jurisdictions imposed different legal standards and customs. In addition, states tended to favor their domestic mech designers over foreign mech designers in pretty blatant ways.

Therefore, when the MTA finally laid down the law and introduced the licensing system to essentially legalize, regulate and monetize the act of stealing someone else's mech design or component design, the mech industry finally became more tolerable for the smaller players who couldn't afford the army of lawyers required to argue their sides of the story.

These days, the MTA's own people and Als made their own judgement how much mech designers borrowed from other mech designers. While it was possible for the mech designers involved to dispute the MTA's judgement, few did so, as this organization enjoyed a very good reputation of impartiality.

Of course, no system was perfect. It didn't deal too well with concurrent innovations developed separately but shared too much in common. Usually such disputes ended in contentious compromises that pleased neither parties involved.

Another huge hole in the licensing system was that it mainly held force in the public mech markets.

What if someone ripped off someone else's design but never published them on the market?

Mechs designs intended for a specific client usually didn't go through MTA validation, thereby denying the huge organization an opportunity to get a good look whether they stole something or not. Chasing after this low-key, behind-the-scenes thievery required a lot of initiative on the part of the original mech designer's legal representatives.

Another big blind spot was the black market, the frontier market and any other unregulated market. Places where the influence of the MTA didn't extend became the favored paradises for mech designers with loose hands.

"I knew that pirate designers are completely shameless in ripping off other people's designs, but why does it have to be one of mine?!"

Ves gnashed his teeth as he studied the mech model that the Blind Men predominantly adopted.

"Blue Paradisio, eh? Let's see where this mech model comes from and who dares to copy my work."

Digging into the intelligence files provided by the friends of the Swordmaidens, he found out that the Blue Paradisio was a recent work from a young pirate designer called Ronnie Blast. Ves didn't look surprised when Ronnie Blast's record stated that he was an Apprentice Mech Designer who originated from the Bright Republic.

"Sounds like an alias."

The record failed to mention why Ronnie got exiled to the frontier, but he somehow became a pirate designer under the umbrella of the Dragon Alliance.

From there, this fellow pumped out various pirated mech designs that mixed and mashed elements of various legitimate designs into versions that were more practical to the frontier.

As Ves studied Ronnie's mech catalog in more detail, he found his works to be full of borrowed elements that were actually quite decent. This plagiarizer knew what to look out for and had an eye for practical quality.

Of course, the shortcoming of every plagiarizing mech designer was that they almost always showed inadequate ability when it came to designing

something themselves. Ronnie's mashup designs attempted to fuse several existing design elements together, but it was exactly in these transitions where his designs exposed severe flaws.

A competent mech designer would have known better than to include these flaws and fault lines into their own designs. Someone like Ronnie who relied too much on copying good designs lacked the skill and experience to replicate the efforts of their betters.

Ves made a judgement about Ronnie as a mech designer. "Someone like Ronnie should be decent enough when making variants of existing designs. However, he isn't capable of making the transition to designing original mechs."

Fortunately for him, the frontier mech markets openly tolerated pirated designs to the point where they became ubiquitous. When Ves once asked Ketis if pirate designers ever respected the intellectual property of legitimate mech designers, she laughed in his face!

"Trash like Ronnie are only able to thrive in these lawless markets where the pirates who buy his mechs don't know any better."

The MTA's validation process would have issued a ton of negative marks on his designs. If they somehow to the MTA's approval to get sold, they would still have to reserve the bulk of their earnings to pay off the forced licensing fees.

"I'll remember you, Ronnie."

Having marked out this mech designer for later, Ves turned back to the mech model the Blind Men adopted recently. They actually incurred huge debts to modernize their mech roster, and actually fell into a somewhat bad spot in the Dragon Alliance for that. No wonder they ran off all the way to the Woolox System.

The Blue Paradisio appeared to be a cross between the landbound Crystal Lord and another spaceborn rifleman mech design. What Ves found fault with the design was that the Crystal Lord depended rather heavily on quality materials and good craftsmanship, both of which the Blue Paradisio lacked.

"The Crystal Lord is a design with strict quality requirements. It's a mech model that's always been geared towards leaders and champions. Ronnie completely missed the point of my second original design."

To Ves, it appeared that Ronnie took no notice of the vision for the Crystal Lord's intended use. He only saw something shiny and crudely copied the design while at the same time cutting all kinds of corners in an effort to make it cheaper and easier to fabricate in frontier conditions.

Ves estimated the cost of the Blue Paradisio to be more than half as less than the original Crystal Lord. One of the biggest faults of this pirated spaceborn rifleman mech design was that it completely lacked the partial compressed armor coverage. That turned the Blue Paradisio into something of a glass cannon.

"The Crystal Lord and the Blue Paradisio fight completely differently despite sharing many of the same design elements."

Ves palmed his face with his gauntlet, practically smacking it. He then slammed his face against his desk.

THUNK!

His Squalon's helmet immediately folded around his head to absorb the impact.

THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!

"HOW STUPID CAN YOU BE, RONNIE?! IF YOU RIP OFF A PREMIUM MECH DESIGN, THEN YOU BETTER DESIGN A PREMIUM MECH! WHY



DON'T YOU STEAL A BUDGET MECH DESIGN IF YOU WANTED TO DESIGN A BUDGET MECH!"

Ves wanted to take his gauntlets and strangle Ronnie in person for his abject stupidity! This numbskull didn't even plagiarize properly!

The contrasts couldn't be more obvious.

The Crystal Lord scored well in speed, endurance and armor.

The Blue Paradisio still remained fast, but its endurance and armor both dropped like a rock.

The Crystal Lord excelled in firing rapid volleys of laser beams with its lightened but still very potent laser rifle with integrated crystal builder technology.

In an attempt to shore up its new weaknesses, Ronnie configured Blue Paradisio into a long-ranged marksman mech whose laser rifles fired powerful, accurate laser beams but at an excruciatingly low firing rate. The overall efficiency of its laser rifles barely surpassed regular ones due to the very poor quality and implementation of imitation crystal technology.

As for the sad excuse of a crystal implanted in the chest of the Crystal Lord, Ves didn't even deign to mention them. "Where did Ronnie source these crystals anyway?"

Overall, if Ves read the Blue Paradisio's design evolution correctly, then it appeared to Ves that Ronnie blundered his way by borrowing some shiny designs on a whim. The most egregious fault with Ronnie's design methodology was that he never formed a coherent vision of his end product.

"This guy basically doesn't know what he'll get at the end. His design choices doesn't reflect a specific strategy or outcome, but instead only addresses the

immediate problems he encounters along the way in the most expedient manner possible."

There were plenty of great mech designers who managed to do fine without forming a vision beforehand. Everyone was different and some just like to develop their mechs from the ground up without any preconceived notions. They only felt restricted when every major aspect was already set in stone.

"Still, just because there are alternative methods doesn't mean that they are appropriate to everybody."

The Blue Paradisio radiated a sense of quality at first glance. Its design obviously relied heavily on the contours and visual cues of the Crystals to reinforce the notion that it was a high performing mech. Its bright blue coating and markings also distinguished it from the partially corroded second-hand mechs that pirates generally favored.

Yet underneath that compelling exterior, the Blue Paradisio was riddled with so many faults and awful design choices that Ronnie would have been better off copying a proper budget mech design and making a variant out of it to earn some quick cash.

Ves figured that the reason why Ronnie didn't do so but instead tried to design something more radical was because he had something to prove. If he couldn't do anything except design variants all day, what reason would there be for the Dragon Alliance to keep him on retainer?

"Still, why did the Blind Men settle for this awful design?"

The records about the Blind Men mentioned very little detail. They were fairly new and hadn't come to prominence. They shouldn't have risen to this scale so rapidly at all, actually.

"The Blind Men have backers." Ves concluded.

By now, Ves knew that a decent amount of pirate gangs in fact relied on external funding to prop themselves up in the frontier. Those who lacked a backer usually envied those that did, and so tried to find anyone who was willing to fund their activities in exchange for favors and other services.

The Blind Men seemed to be a notch above the bottom feeder pirate outfits by adhering to a cult-like ideology. They widely applied a gene mod template to themselves that appeared to change their eyes into viewing reality at a much greater spectrum than normal.

These changes led their eyes to grow more dull, hence why they adopted their moniker. To the Blind Men, they viewed their surroundings in such a different way that they developed peculiar beliefs in an attempt to find meaning in what they observed.

In practical terms, their focus on expanding their eyesight and training their observation skills turned them into better-than-average marksmen. Their leader, the Blind Prophet, emphasized the recruitment of mech pilots who already specialized in mech marksmanship to reinforce their strengths.

The Blind Men's martial tradition completely focused on strengthening their marksmanship. Devoting so much efforts in training their mech pilots in this aspect and adopting the Blue Paradisio as their signature mech model turned this outfit into a very capable opponent in this regard.

"As long as the Vandals or Swordmaidens aren't able to get close, these Blue Paradisios can chew apart our mechs over time."

Even if Ves brutally cut apart the Blue Paradisios many failings and shortcomings, most of those weaknesses didn't have much relevance as long as the marksmen mechs remained far away!

Obviously, Kaso's Remediers and the Slick Hairs would do their best to cover for their long-ranged fire support. Attempting to bypass their entanglement to

get at the Blind Men's formidable ranged mechs would be key to winning the upcoming battle.

Ves dreaded the prospect of being defeated by a ripoff design of his own work. How humiliating it must be to die by such an awful imitation!

### **Chapter 959 Blind Prophe**

In the preceding days before the inevitable confrontation between the Flagrant Swordmaidens and the affiliate pirate gangs of the Dragon Alliance, Ves stewed in his anger.

Ronnie Blast and his Blue Paradisio design profoundly offended Ves' professional sensibilities.

If someone ripped off his designs, they better do a decent job at it! This rank amateur completely missed the point about the original Crystal Lord, yet somehow felt daring enough to adapt it to his own work!

If Ves ever met Ronnie Blast in person, he'd probably smack his face into a mess of red. "I'll probably do more than that."

While it was something of an inevitability that any decently successful mech designer suffered from design theft, that didn't mean Ves would maintain his composure when confronted by such a case.

As several days went by, Ves couldn't help but go over the archival footage of the Blind Men's Blue Paradisios and pick them apart to excruciating detail.

Ves obsessively uncovered every flaw, every mistake, every imperfection and every weakness of both its design and the individual physical copies in the hands of the Blind Men.

He knew it was rather unhealthy to spend so much time on analyzing the Blue Paradisios to death. As long as his efforts resulted in more weaknesses that could be exploited, his peculiar hobby could be forgiven to an extent.

As Ves took a break and summarize his findings on the Blue Paradisio, he snorted in contempt. "I think I understand the Blue Paradisio even better than Ronnie Blast now. I can easily school him about the many attributes and faults of his ripoff design for days upon end!"

It would be a waste of time, of course. The lesson he would be teaching this thieving bastard would be a much more practical than theoretical one.

Almost a week went by after the Flagrant Swordmaidens got the news about the strike force heading in their path. While they attempted to circumvent the interception by taking a detour, once they emerged in an unpopulated star system with no planets worth noting, alarms immediately rang across the ship.

[RED ALERT! UNKNOWN MECHS AND STARSHIPS DETECTED IN THE VICINITY OF OUR EMERGENCE ZONE. ALL HANDS TO BATTLE STATIONS!]

Not that everyone needed to run to their posts. The alert level had already been raised to yellow and everyone in the remnant fleet already took up their posts in full preparation of an imminent battle.

In the Shield of Hispania's command center, Ves sat at his regular observer's seat in his repainted Squalon. Besides his peculiar combat armor model, he didn't attract too much attention.

Major Verle observed the local plot of the surrounding space that grew increasingly more detailed as the after-effects of their FTL transition subsided. An unknown enemy force clearly parked in a region of space that fell within the emergence zone of any incoming fleet arriving from a specific star system.

It didn't take a genius to determine that these unknowns predicted the remnant fleet's route and moved to block their way.

"The enemy fleet is about an hour away from entering into battle range."

It took at least five hours for the Vandal and Swordmaiden carriers to finish cycling their FTL drives. The time to do so increased for many ships due to lack of supplies and lack of thorough maintenance.

This gave the enemy fleet more than enough time to catch up to the Flagrant Swordmaidens and force a battle.

As long-ranged sensors resolved more details, they conclusively matched the unknown fleet elements to the three pirate gangs that set out from the Woolox System.

"We are ninety percent confident that the unknown fleet consists of ships from Kaso's Remediers, the Slick Hairs and the Blind Men, sir." A sensor officer reported to Major Verle. "Every ship we've observed is a match to the ships that departed from the Dragon Alliance's space station at Woolox."

"Have you detected other ships?"

"Our sensors detected no additional ships so far, but our observations are ongoing, sir. We are attempting to scan the entire system, but so far we have failed to detect anything of note."

Ves considered this as good news. If the pirates arrayed against the Flagrant Swordmaidens received reinforcements, then the odds of winning decreased rapidly.

Right now, the disparity in numbers already provided plenty of headaches to the Vandals and the Swordmaidens. Even after all of their repairs, the Flagrant Swordmaidens could muster only a hundred-and-fifty spaceborn mechs or so at most.

The enemy force fielded at least seventy more mechs than that. While the quality of their mechs didn't impress Ves very much, he knew the folly of underestimating the disparity in numbers.

It would have been a bit better for the Flagrant Swordmaidens if they could have serviced and repaired their worn mechs to peak condition. At their full strength, the Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs stood a good chance of thrashing the enemy mech force.

Yet right now, the Flagrant Swordmaidens were nearing the end of their rope. The psychological weariness among the mech pilots combined with half-repaired states of most of their mechs severely impacted their effective battle strength.

"Everyone is tired. They are tired of fighting and running."

This weariness reflected in the resigned and moody expressions of the Vandals in the command center. No one looked forward to the upcoming battle. After Ves and the strategists analyzed the enemy mech force in detail, they all pronounced that the Flagrant Swordmaidens would have a hard fight on their hands.

No matter who won or lost, perhaps they'd only be left with a fraction of their mechs at the end!

By then, even a space fly could tear apart the remnant fleet!

Even the pirates themselves probably didn't wish to fight the Flagrant Swordmaidens. If not for the Dragons of the Void coercing them into action, they would have rather preferred to bully the weak instead of confronting a damaged but battle-hardened mech force.

"What's in it for them?" Ves wondered quietly. He wasn't too familiar with the circumstances of the Remediers and the Slick Hairs, but he read quite a bit of material about the Blind Men.

While their cult beliefs made no sense to him, on a secular level there was no doubt the Blind Men incurred a lot of debts. Perhaps the Dragons of the Void promised to write off their debts if they participated in this battle.

"Even so, they are in a pretty bad fix."

Minutes passed as everyone made their final preparations in a fatalistic manner. While the Flagrant Swordmaidens could have delayed the battle by several hours by attempting to fly away, they saw no point in delaying the inevitable.

The handful of sandman motherships that followed their FTL transitions still loomed behind them. If they took too long to wrap up the battle, the sandmen ships would eventually catch up!

Therefore, rather than avoiding the battle, the remnant fleet instead took the initiative to close in on the enemy fleet!

"Those pirate carriers are probably filled with fuel and energy." Someone remarked. "As long as we win the battle, we can force the ships into surrender and siphon away their fuel and supplies!"

"Heh. That's easier said than done. Let's try and survive this battle first before we talk about the spoils."

A nervous tension suffused the entire remnant fleet as both forces closed in on each other. It would take much less than an hour at this rate for battle to erupt!

"The enemy carriers are deploying their mechs for battle!"

The pirates only deployed fifty or so mechs on patrol, which didn't seem so threatening. Yet fifteen minutes before the inevitable clash, the pirate carriers began to disgorge mech after mech, each of them forming up in their own little groups with little regard for formations or order.

"We have confirmed sightings of over two-hundred-and-twenty mechs, sir."

The three pirate mech forces formed up in a simple arrangement, as they lacked the discipline and training for anything more sophisticated.



The mechs of the Kaso's Remediers positioned themselves in the main line. Their eclectic mix of melee and ranged mechs gave them a lot of versatility, but as the biggest and strongest pirate gang among the three, they took on the responsibility of bearing the brunt of the Flagrant Swordmaiden's fury.

The Slick Hairs fast and nimble melee mechs positioned themselves at the flanks. There was no doubt they would attempt to bypass the Flagrant Swordmaidens at the front in order to hit them in the sides or rear. Perhaps they would even attempt to assault the Shield of Hispania and the other carriers directly!

As for the Blind Men, their Blue Paradisios formed up well behind and above the Remediers. This gave them a good overhead angle from a comfortably long distance to pick off the Flagrant Swordmaiden mechs.

Right now, Major Verle communicated privately with Commander Dise on how they should address the threat of the Blind Men's fire support.

Should they divert precious light skirmishers in an attempt to threaten the Blue Paradisios out of sniping their mechs? Perhaps that was a trap to lure them in only for the Slick Hairs to turn around and cut off their escape route.

No matter what response they offered to the enemy formation, the Flagrant Swordmaidens would definitely exact a very painful price.

As Ves called up a projection of the mechs of the Blind Men, he glowered even deeper. The mere sight of the Blue Paradisios made his eyes red! If that blasted Ronnie had more sense, he wouldn't have ripped off the Crystal Lord, making it so that the Blind Men fielded a poor facsimile of Ves' design against himself!

His fury boiled over until something finally snapped within his mind. "Major Verle, I have a request."

The major turned away from his argument with Commander Dise and frowned at Ves. "What is it, Mr. Larkinson? Please make it quick."

"I'd like to open up a comm channel to the Blind Men." Ve stated with forced calmness. It wouldn't do to come across as unhinged right now. "There is something I'd like to talk about them. It concerns their mech model, sir."

"Hmmm, I did hear that their main mech model resembles your old work. Fine, then. Just remember that you have only minutes before the battle commences."

"I'll keep it short."

He was grateful that Major Verle didn't ask too many questions. To be honest, Ves didn't entirely know why he wanted to talk or what he wanted to achieve. He merely wanted to vent his fury on the Blind Men.

As the communications officer took a moment to send out a comm request to the Blind Men, to his surprise the other party actually accepted the call.

A projection of the Blind Prophet appeared in front of Ves. The man adopted the stereotypical appearance of a prophet, resembling an old man with a long and mostly ragged-looking grey beard. His eyes also looked rather murky, as if he was truly blind.

The only concession to practicality was that he wore a piratized piloting suit at the moment.

"Flagrant Vandals, I have foreseen your doom. Your flesh will freeze and rot in the void of space and your mechs will be strewn across this star system in the form of broken wrecks."

"Cut the crap, you charlatan." Ves hissed. "Let me tell you something about the mechs you're piloting. They're cheap imitations of my own design. Don't know what I'm talking about? Here, let me send you the relevant files on my

Crystal Lord design. Do you see whose name is attached to the design? Me. Ves Larkinson. THAT'S ME AND THAT'S MY ORIGINAL DESIGN!"

The Blind Prophet appeared a bit bewildered at the person at the other end of the channel. "Mad ravings of a man already condemned to death. Your spittle is meaningless, so save us all the trouble. Our victory is assured and your defeat is only a matter of time."

"Hahahaha!" Ves laughed. "Confident, are you? Well tough luck, because you're facing against me, the original designer of the Crystal Lord, of which your Blue Paradisio is like a retarded cousin! DO YOU THINK YOU CAN DEFEAT ME WITH A MECH MODEL DERIVED FROM MY OWN WORK?!"

Practically the entire command center fell into silence as they heard Ves' outburst. They never expected the usually well-behaved mech designer to be so furious!

#### **Chapter 960 The Truth Hurts**

"You Blind Men pretend that you can see further ahead than anyone else, but to me your names are right on the mark. As far as I'm concerned, all of you must be blind as a bat if you think the Blue Paradisios are any good!"

The Blind Prophet's projection shook and leaned back against Ves' increasingly more vehement tirade. "Mr. Larkinson, whoever you are, your infantile flailing amuses no one."

"What did you say?! Infantile flailing?! I'll tell you what infantile flailing means! Your Blue Paradisios are living proof of Ronnie Blast's infantile flailing! Your mechs are complete failures as an effective design! The only thing it has going for it is its mobility and accuracy, but at what cost?!"

"Ronnie's mech model shares none of the excellent armor coverage of my original Crystal Lord design! Not a single hint of compressed armor is retained in Ronnie's bastardized design, but he has the gall to keep its armor plating as

thin as the thickness a data pad! I bet your mechs can't even cope with continuous micro-impacts from space dust! That's how pathetic the Blue Paradisio is able to withstand damage!"

"My authentic Crystal Lord design is a marvel of endurance! It is a sleek and compact design because locomotion on land doesn't require too much energy. It's a completely different matter when Ronnie mashes in a flight system all of a sudden without any regard of my design's existing internal architecture! The abomination that he created with blending the Crystal Lord with a spaceborn mech design has turned your mechs into the worst of both worlds: low-performing with incredibly poor endurance!"

"That sad excuse of a laser rifle you're wielding is a horribly overpriced piece of crap. You would have all been better off salvaging a half-wrecked laser rifle off a debris field than buy this hamfisted imitation from Ronnie! It is capable of firing a powerful laser beam, I admit, but what's the point when its firing rate is slower than the amount of meals I eat every day! Its knockoff crystal technology implementation is so crude and sloppy that it's obvious that Ronnie has no idea what he was working with! I bet those laser rifles are already giving you problems, right? That's because those cheap imitation crystals are burning themselves out! They barely last a couple of hundred shots before they give up the ghost!"

Ves lost himself in his tirade. He truly wanted to make the Blind Men see what an awful mistake they made by buying so many copies of the Blue Paradisio!

"Mr. Larkinson, I do not appreciate you finding fault of our mechs. A battle is fought and won by men, not mechs. We have already seen that your mechs are not in good shape. The condition of our machines will hardly be a detriment to our assured victory in the coming battle."

"Hehe." Ves nefariously chuckled. "Your victory is assured? You are truly blind to believe so! To me, your mechs are all one step away from falling apart! Let

me see from what mech you are transmitting. Ah, that one in the middle and front, eh? I've studied this mech of yours. Is your flight system stuttering? That's because it's installed incorrectly during the assembly phase! Whoever fabricated this copy did such a poor job that it will only take a single strong impact from the sides to dislodge critical parts of your flight system! By then, your mech is a sitting duck, condemned to coast in space in a predictable path that makes it easy for us to shoot you down!"

"And that mech to the right of you. That machine is a particularly poor effort on the part of the manufacturer. Did Ronnie outsource the fabrication to a bunch of monkeys or something?! I bet its legs hardly function at all. Not that it's important in space battles, except I can tell you that if those legs are shot out from under it, the failure will cascade to the mech engine, causing it to shut down entirely and rendering the mech mechanically frozen! How would it be able to fight if it can't move its limbs?!"

"That mech at the rear has a severe sensor problem! Any half-decent ECM system can fool its sensors to such an extent that it will truly to turn blind! It's liable to fire its laser rifle at your own mechs rather than the mechs of its opponents!"

"The mech next to the last one takes the cake in terms of poor craftsmanship. Whoever fabricated this mech needs to be thrown out the airlock because its power reactor is no good! That mech already has jitter problems right? That's because it's constantly attempting to stall its inevitably reactor shutdown! One strong concussive shock will definitely force its power reactor to stall and undergo its emergency shutdown process! The mech pilot inside won't even have any power left to call for help by the time it becomes a floating statue!"

By now, the spectators and anyone else who listened in turned numb. The communications officer opened up an unencrypted channel to the Blind Prophet's mech, so plenty of other people listened in as well.

None of them expected to hear Ves turn into a maddened dog who couldn't let go of the Blue Paradisio's many faults!

As the primary recipient of Ves' angry ramblings, the Blind Prophet hardly got a word in response! It hardly even registered to the pirate commander to press the button to shut down the communication channel.

This was because the faults that Ves exposed so brutally about their mechs all described their current states to a disturbing degree of accuracy! The Blind Prophet simply could tear his ears away from the unvarnished exposure of all of the flaws of his outfit's mechs no matter how much it hurt to listen to Ves!

The pure emotion that Ves put behind his words practically drew the Blind Prophet into a forced introspection. Not a single fault exposed by Ves was inaccurate. This mech designer truly knew what he was talking about!

"Hahahaha! Tell me, Blind Prophet, are you still pleased about your new mechs? Do you still think you got a good bargain by purchasing these flying wrecks? Open your eyes, old man! The truth is that Ronnie Blast bamboozled you with a mech model that's horribly overpriced! How much did you pay for them all? I bet you paid at least thrice as much as they are actually worth! Hahahaha!"

"You blind idiots. If you're blind enough to fall for Ronnie's scam, how are you even confident of winning against us?! Your judgement is completely wrong! Let me tell you something. Fielding the Blue Paradisio against the sole mech designer of the Crystal Lord is the last mistake you will ever make in your lives. That's because I've already picked out all of the faults I mentioned and more and sent them all to our own mech pilots. It only takes a few well-placed prods to collapse all of your shoddy mechs! There is nothing about your Blue Paradisios that can confound my judgement! To you, they might have seemed like decent marksman mechs, but what I see is nothing but a collection of holes!"

The Blind Prophet shook. His expression had become grave at the start, before growing more resigned, until finally settling on fear.

Yes. Fear! The Blind Prophet didn't do anything to hide his obvious, naked fear towards Ves!

As Ves wound up for another angry speech despite both forces about to come into fighting range, the Blind Prophet finally shook up and pressed a button to close the channel. The pirate commander's projection winked out just as Ves wanted to berate the man some more.

"What?! How can you shut off the channel!?"

Without asking for permission, Ves connected his CFA comm to the CFA shuttle in the Shield of Hispania's shuttle bay. Using its advanced CFA communications technology that Ves had inadvertently updated previously with his connection to the galactic net, it forcefully intruded upon the communication system of the Blue Paradisio and reopened the comm connection by force!

"You again!" The Blind Prophet despaired as he kept pressing the button and activating the mental command to shut down the channel. His own mech refused to obey his commands! "Why won't you go away?!"

"WHERE ARE YOU RUNNING, OLD MAN?! I have much more to say! Just look at you flailing around trying to deactivate this channel! Hah! Tough luck! The security suites of your mechs are so poor and outdated that any three-year old child with a hacking comm can take over your mech! Just look at how easily I managed to forcibly reopen this channel!"

"Go away!" The Blind Prophet screeched. "Your poisonous words will not have sway on us!"

Ves cruelly grinned. "No chance of that, you blind old man! I admit that you're blind, but your ears seem to be working just fine! Let me tell you about your

good buddy Ronnie. You see, Ronnie is a bad boy. Instead of licensing some proper software for his mech, he probably probably pirated some random mech operation system for his Blue Paradisio design. WHAT AN IDIOT! No mech designer should pirate a random software package off the galactic net! Your mechs are all riddled with backdoors and holes that it would probably take our hackers a couple of minutes to sabotage!"

"That's not possible! Mechs aren't supposed to be susceptible to hacking!"

"Oh, deny all you want, but how can you explain how easily my comm hacked into your mech's communication system? Face it, you old man. You not only got scammed by Ronnie, but you are piloting mechs that anyone with decent hackers can take control of! Your Blue Paradisio's software is so decrepit that even two-hundred year old mechs are harder to hack than yours!"

"No more! Please, no more, Mr. Larkinson!" The spooked pirate commander pleaded. "We'll go! We'll go! We won't disturb you any longer!"

After that, the Blind Prophet issued a quick series of commands that immediately saw the battle line of the Blind Mech turn around and flee back to their carriers!

Even their carriers started to turn around as if they couldn't wait to get away from Ves' acid tongue!

Ves grew even angrier as he saw all of the mechs of the Blind Men turn around in an attempt to flee his destructive rants. He stood up from his observation chair!

"WHERE ARE YOU GOING! GET BACK HERE! RUNNING WON'T SAVE YOU FROM THE REALIZATION THAT YOU BOUGHT THE WORST MECHS IN THE FRONTIER!"

Even though the Blind Prophet couldn't cut off the forced communication channel, the pirate commander did his best to ignore the voice of Ves.



"Lalalalalala! I am not hearing anything! I am not hearing anything! As soon as I get out of here, I'll make myself turn deaf!"

"Why are you running! Come back here pirate! I can talk all day about your faulty mechs!"

Even as Ves continued to yell at the fleeing Blind Men, Major Verle regained his senses first. He looked back at the local plot and saw that the sudden exit of around sixty rifleman mechs turned the Remediers and the Slick Hairs into complete disorder.

The two pirate outfits couldn't believe what was happening! One of their fellow gangs was actually running away before they even fired a single shot!

"Attack!" Major Verle forcefully commanded. "Send in our assault force! Crash into the Remediers! They're vulnerable as long as they remain in disarray! Break them apart before the Blind Men regain their senses and turn around!"

It took some time, but the prepared mechs of the Vandals and Swordmaidens began to move in against their unsettled and distracted opponents. The pirates had left themselves completely open by listening in on Ves' public tirade!

"Why are you running! I'm not finished yet! Not by a long shot!" Ves kept hounding the Blind Men even as they crashed into the hangar bays of their carriers in an attempt to get out as fast as they could! "No matter how many light-years you run, the truth will catch up to you! Just face it! You all bought crap mechs that are worth less than how much you can earn back if you scrap them all! Buying Ronnie's products is the biggest mistake in your blind, foolish lives! Next time, buy legitimate mechs instead of cheap knockoffs!"