

Chapter 321 Powerlessness

The entire surface of the Glowing Planet had turned into a salvager's paradise. The amount of damaged and destroyed wrecks reached a mind-boggling number that would make any scavenger salivate at the prospect of unearthing this hidden wealth.

Yet at this moment, nobody spared a glance at the valuable remains. Neither the pirates nor their adversaries put the wrecks in their eyes as they steadily maneuvered in low orbit.

"At least three major pirate armadas are heading in our direction!" Ves concluded loudly. "Get the spaceborn mechs ready. We're going to need their protection very soon!"

The mech technicians obediently quickened their servicing of the two mechs. One of them actually consisted of Dietrich's old Harrier. Though it had been designed as an aerial mech, it still functioned decently in space.

The Little Boss himself walked over to Ves. "Is the Harrier in good shape?"

"Good enough for your purposes. I made some last-minute tweaks that will push more speed out of your mech. How are your wounds?"

Dietrich padded his recently regenerated arm. "The Mech Corps used their best facilities on hand to clone my arm. It's going to take a year to work it in, but it won't affect my accuracy when I'm back inside the Harrier."

A mech pilot interfaced with their mechs with their minds, not their muscles. In theory, a brain in a jar could also pilot a mech.

In practice, the state of the pilot's body had a profound influence on the connection between the pilot and the mech. A pilot with an imperfect body often carried his ailments through the connection, thereby affecting the ultimate performance of the mech.

Ves refrained from mentioning these facts to Dietrich because it went over his head. He let his friend keep his delusions in order to retain his confidence. It wouldn't do to pop his bubble just when he was about to sortie.

"So many pirates have come to spoil our escape." He sighed. "I never knew there would be so many pirates in the Komodo Star Sector."

"You haven't even seen the tip of their numbers. I can tell you there are way more pirates in the frontier and the Nyxian Gap who haven't taken the bait. Most pirates are cowards, you see. Brawling out in the open like this isn't their style."

"Even then, it's still ridiculous to see so many pirates sporting so much hardware. Even if their ships and mechs are scraping the bottom of the barrel, they still brought enough numbers to overrun a major region of stars. Why haven't they carved out their own state with their firepower?"

Dietrich laughed at that question. "That's because they never see eye-to-eye with each other! Except for the Dragons of the Void, all of those other pirate groups can't manage to keep a hold of more than a few hundred mechs. The moment they try to subjugate more pilots, they'll all rebel and break apart."

The mention of the Dragons of the Void caused Ves to frown. "Those guys again. Who are these people? They're able to brainwash so many pirates it's a wonder they're still around. I would have thought the other pirates would have ganged up on them already."

"It's the same story. Pirates are fundamentally cowards and they never get along with each other. It takes a massive pirate horde to wipe them out, which is something that will never happen. Even now, those three pirate alliances heading to intercept the Mech Corps are guarding against each other as well."

Ves hadn't noticed that, but as he eyed the plot, it started to become clear. The pirates made sure to approach from opposite directions and follow trajectories that didn't intersect with each other.

"I'm not sure this will help us right now. The pirates seem content to stay out of each other's way."

Multiple predators of the same race wouldn't quibble with each other in front of their prey.

"Contact in twenty minutes! Mech pilots, please board your mechs!" An announcement rang out.

"This is my cue." Dietrich said and turned around to race towards his Harrier. "Wish me luck!"

Over the next minutes, the situation started to become clearer. Ves got a better idea of what went on when he analyzed the movements of all of the fleets.

"First, we'll converge with the spaceborn mechs of the Mech Corps. Second, we'll combine forces with the Mech Legion!"

That last one came as a surprise to Ves, but he quickly understood the logic. Neither the Mech Corps nor the Mech Legion stood a chance if the pirates decided to commit all their forces on one of their fleets.

Rather than take the gamble and pray the pirates decided to go for their enemies, the two military fleets decided to take the certain path and gather together into one giant concentration of military-grade mechs and carriers.

"Even the pirates will quell at the thought of facing such strength."

The only problem was that the Mech Corps couldn't trust the Mech Legion and vice versa. They only had an incentive to band together when they were knee-deep into the Glowing Zone. Once they reached the edge, all thought of

cooperation would vanish. Ves predicted that it would be a game of chicken to see which side struck the first blow.

"This is a mess."

If his relatives back at the Larkinson Compound heard about the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion banding together, they'd laugh at him for being a liar. Yet this momentary alliance of convenience presented the best option by far to make it through their common enemy.

The first part of the plan went smoothly. The pirates failed to intercept the ascending fleet before they merged with the spaceborn fleet. Bolstered by a significant amount of ships and mechs from the 1st Volari Spacehawks and some other regiments, the fleet gained a lot of teeth all of a sudden.

Still, the pirates resolved to stop them before they converged with the Mech Legion. Even they could extrapolate their trajectories and figure out the military fleets intended to back each other up.

Dietrich joined the massive formations of spaceborn mechs with his Harrier and continued to fend off the increasingly formidable waves of pirates. At another corner of the fleet, Ghanso Larkinson fought with relentless hatred against the pirates with his Vhedra mech. Their earnest defense caused the pirates to falter in their attacks.

"They're hesitating!"

"I don't see those Dragons of the Void bastards anywhere!"

"Push hard and fast! They'll pull back as long as we make them suffer!"

A prodigious amount of firepower travelled through space. The defenders fought with fury as they vented their frustrations accumulated in recent times onto the pirates that dared to face the Mech Corps directly.

Pirate mechs fell in great numbers, prompting the first of the cowards to turn back. However, a few of the daredevils continued to push onwards as they'd been promised great rewards for killing even one enemy mech.

At this stage in the campaign, both sides had lost their edge. Every mech pilot fought at least a dozen different battles with only occasional bouts of sleep as their rest. The constant vigilance and nerve-wracking patrols wore down their mental states and slowed down their reflexes.

Their mechs also dropped in quality. The pirates had it worst, as they often used cheap, salvaged mechs that ordinary mercenaries disdained. Many of the mechs they piloted had been scavenged from the scrap belts orbiting the Glowing Planet. They only enjoyed a rudimentary repair before being put back to service.

This led to the unfortunate tendency for pirates to eject early. They possessed no faith in the strength of their mechs. Some pirates even piloted their fifth or sixth mechs.

As for the Mech Corps, they used to field large number of high quality mechs. However, months of campaigning had ground down a substantial number of those premium mechs, which forced the mech pilots who ejected from a bad situation to take up cheaper run-of-the-mill mechs that had been kept as backups.

Ves noted that despite the somewhat tepid enthusiasm among the pirates, they still scored plenty of kills. The Mech Corps continued to hemorrhage mechs as they attempted link up with the Mech Legion.

"It's the attrition and weariness that gets to you." He said as other mech pilots and mech technicians gathered at his side.

Landbound mechs ceased to be useful in this conflict in space. Walter's Urmech and Fadah's Blackbeak had no way of maneuvering in space. They had to possess a flight system at the very least to travel back and forth.

Not all landbound mechs lost all of their power. In an emergency, a couple of rifleman mechs could position themselves next to the hangar doors and shoot out when they opened, but usually that was a waste of time. The Whalers didn't even bother with that nonsense.

Fadah grumbled a bit when he stared at the Mech Legion's fleet. "I'm more worried about the Vesians. We all know that we won't be playing nice once we make it to the end."

Even Ves worried about the possibility of falling out. They had to stick close enough to present a united front, but they also had to keep enough difference to discourage any funny business.

"I'm sure the Mech Corps has the situation well in hand. They're not stupid."

They could only trust in the Mech Corps to see them through. If nothing else, Ves had learned how little he mattered in a conflict that spanned over countless mechs and tens of thousands of ships. Unless some kind of mythical ace mech pilot showed up, the battle between the different factions depended upon thousands and thousands of mechs.

The sheer number of mechs involved in this struggle really opened his mind. As he tracked the slow convergence of the two military fleets, his despair about his insignificance increasingly took over his mind.

Then, he stopped.

"What am I thinking?" He shook his head. "I'm a mech designer. There's always a way for me to influence a battle."

As long as he designed better mechs that sold pretty well, he did his part in helping out the Republic. Ves imagined a day where his designs dominated the market and elevated everyone's strength.

Such a dream may take a long time to come into fruition, but it would definitely come to pass sooner or later.

As Ves dreamt of better times, the battle out in space grew into a tangled and dispersed running skirmish. Thousands of carriers and transports of all shapes and sizes desperately boosted in a particular direction. They constantly built up their speed as they leveraged the Glowing Planet's gravity well for their upcoming slingshot maneuver.

This made it difficult for the pursuing pirates to catch up unless they followed the same trajectory. However, this would put them into a permanent chase where they wouldn't have a lot of chances to catch up once they fell behind.

Ghanso knew that he had to hold the pirates back at this stage. As long as they linked up to the Mech Legion and sling-shotted their way out of orbit, they'd buy some precious time.

His Vhedra soared in space alongside his diminished squad and snapped off a series of shots. His laser beams disabled two approaching pirate mechs. While the machines hadn't blown up, his lasers successfully disabled their fragile flight systems, stranding them in a helpless ballistic course that brought them further away.

"Your aim's improved!" A colleague at his side exclaimed. "Just a week ago you would have only taken out a single mech!"

"I had a lot of practice." Ghanso replied nonchalantly.

Even as many mech pilots performed worse and worse, Ghanso was one of a few who constantly improved. Ever since he escaped death by ejecting early

against the foreign expert mech, he found that some kind of limit had broken in his mind.

Many skills he'd been struggling with for years saw rapid improvement all of a sudden. It turned him from a well-trained but inexperienced mech pilot into a force to be reckoned with. His marksmanship trumped over his squadmates by a significant margin, and he continued to improve every day.

In truth, many mech pilots broke past their limits and experienced something similar to Ghanso's state. Mech pilots who experienced true combat and survived with their spirits intact grew more passionate about piloting mechs and bonded deeper with their mechs.

To a lesser extent, both Raella and Fadah experienced brisk improvement in their judgement and skills.

While Ghanso was taking out enemy pirate mechs left and right, he hadn't realized he attracted a lot of attention. The pirates shifted their deployment and a squad of extraordinary mechs veered towards his location.

An alarm sounded off his console. "Priority alert! Incoming expert mechs!"

Chapter 322 Heroes

The moment the three pirate-affiliated expert mechs moved into action, the rest of their ilk regained their courage. Unless an ace or god pilot came along, expert mech pilots enjoyed an unparalleled amount of regard. Their presence alone lifted up the pirates and depressed their opponents.

Ghanso Larkinson shivered as his memories cast back at the time when he almost died to an expert mech. Of the three incoming mechs, he recognized one of them as the foreign-owned swordsman mech.

As a light mech, the sophisticated swordsman mech excelled in both speed and offense. It was a one-trick pony that relied on its devastating speed to slice apart any mech in its way and avoid anything that posed a threat.

Right now, that light mech took a backseat to the rifleman mech at the center of their formation. The expert rifleman pilot had already begun to shoot at the Mech Corps with his precision focused laser rifle.

Even at such a ludicrous distance, the expert marksman never failed to miss a target. To consistently hit mechs after mechs when it moved so fast was a testament to the pilot's skill and the mech's advanced targeting technologies.

"Get your heads back together, men!" One of their commanding officer spoke over the channel. "Expert mechs aren't invincible. They can be damaged, hindered and deterred just like any other mech! Pirate experts are the lowest of the low. They have forsaken all of their honor and dignity to pursue scraps of wealth. They are nothing compared to our conviction! We are the Volari Starhawks! We are the spaceborn might of the Republic!"

"For the Republic!"

"For the Starhawks!"

"Down with the pirate experts!"

Somehow, Ghanso got caught up in the excitement. His fears faded away once he realized he had thousands of brothers and sisters at his side.

"Experts can go toe-to-toe against a hundred mechs, but fighting thousands at once is a tall order even for them. We have our own experts as well!"

Half of the Starhawks split up to deter the other pirates with long-ranged fire, while the remaining half tried to stall the approaching experts. Ghanso tried to recall his anti-expert training.

"Spaceborn expert mechs are fast and durable no matter their weight-class. As wasteful as it sounds like, the best way to prevent them from acting with impunity is to throw as much firepower in their direction as possible."

Many squads already started spraying their rifles and cannons in the direction of the experts. Unfortunately, the trio's space knight flew forward and deployed a rectangular tower shield that extended into a half-dome after deploying extendable side plates. The entire shield also started glowing as some kind of energy screen set in.

"Flank the experts but watch your firing lines! Follow your assigned plots!"

More than a thousand mechs dispersed into a sphere that tried to envelop the incoming expert mechs. Despite the naked challenge, the pirate experts refused to be cowed by such tricks. They slammed head-long into the sphere. Dozens of mechs blew up to accurate high-powered laser fire and thunderous sword strokes.

"Open fire according to your sequence!"

The mechs that made up the sphere fired their weapons as soon as they received a special signal. Enough mechs fired at the same time to pressure the enveloped experts from each direction. They only stopped firing when the signal went out, which usually happened if they risked hitting a friendly mech on the other side of the sphere.

Though accidents occasionally happened, the tactic produced solid results. The expert space knight tried and failed to cover the expert rifleman mech. As one of the more fragile expert mechs, the rifleman mech started to sustain significant damage to its rear armor.

However, its rear armor's toughness still surpassed the frontal armor of a regular heavy mech. The rifleman mech didn't go down that easily.

In the meantime, the swordsman mech diverged from its comrades and started to assail the sphere with constant high-speed passes. Each time the expert light mech passed a mech, its swords managed to bisect them in two.

Many of the mechs that tried to target the light mech failed to land a hit. The mech was so remarkably fast and agile that even a hundred mechs failed to land a blow through saturation fire. The expert pilot skillfully moved his finely-tuned machine like an acrobat that always managed to find the tiniest gap in the volleys thrown in his way.

"This slippery bastard!" Ghanso cursed at Old Man Alex's killer. He had no idea why this foreign expert sided with the pirates, but he promised to himself that he wouldn't let this expert get away with his slaughtering this time. "Die!"

His Vhedra took up a stationary position in space, which turned him into a sitting duck. However, only by reducing all of his frame's movement-related vibrations to a minimum could he ensure the highest accuracy.

"I can do this. I hit him once, I can hit him again."

The last time he scored a hit, the light mech charged at him head-on. It didn't require too much technique to land a lucky hit.

This time was different because the expert flew back and forth throughout the sphere formation. Ghanso had to tilt his rifle in much greater angles in order draw a bead on the light mech.

As he tried to gain a feel for the light mech's dodging patterns, he dialed up his laser rifle's power to the maximum. A regular medium-powered laser beam didn't cut it against this opponent. Even an expert light mech boasted enough armor to put an advanced medium knight to shame.

Once his mech received permission to fire, Ghanso pulled the trigger.

The laser beam went wide! It missed the light mech by more than ten meters due to the expert pilot's abrupt maneuvers. The beam instantly travelled onwards into deep space for many light-seconds, growing ever wider until it scattered out of focus.

"Damn it!"

The previous time he hit the light mech turned out to be a fluke. Still, Ghanso tried to regain his calm and returned to his sniper state.

By now, the light mech destroyed seventeen mechs in a row. Fortunately, the expert pilot never deviated from his targets once he began his approach, so many of unlucky mech pilots ejected early.

Nevertheless, the Volari Starhawks kept getting chewed with hardly any results in return. The laser rifleman covered by the space knight continued to disable mech after mech with his lance-like laser beams that burned straight through compressed armor with each shot.

Ghanso took a deep breath and focused on landing his second shot. Once he pulled the trigger, his beam missed again, but only by five meters this time.

"So close!"

He made the right prediction this time, but his mech failed to keep its rifle steady. His nerves grew increasingly frayed as he checked the heat levels of his rifle.

He specifically applied to wield this model. It boasted a vastly higher maximum output capacity at the cost of generating an extreme amount of heat. His rifle could only take three more shots before it automatically entered a forced cooldown cycle.

"I've got three more chances." Ghanso gritted his teeth and aimed again. This time, he didn't take as long to draw a bead as he grew increasingly familiar with the light mech's movement patterns.

This time, a sharp red beam emerged from his rifle and managed to score a glancing blow at the light mech's left foot.

It barely scorched the armor. The expert pilot basically ignored Ghanso's attack and kept focusing on decimating his nearby opponents.

"Don't ignore me!" Ghanso uttered and fired off another shot propelled by his anger.

Whether he lucked out or not, the second beam impacted the railings of the light mech's flight systems. The mech instantly ceased its attack run and whirled away its sword into a different direction.

The sword tip pointed straight at Ghanso, as if the pilot had marked him for death. With a blast, the light mech entered into its high-speed mode straight towards Ghanso's Vhedra in a comet-like approach.

The expert came for Ghanso's head!

"Even as his squad leader yelled at him to eject, Ghanso kept his mech in place and aimed his almost-overheated rifle at the incoming comet. His eyes twitched as he cast his mind completely into his mech.

He stroked the mental trigger of his rifle, spitting out one, final beam.

Though the light mech barrel rolled aside at the last moment, Ghanso incredibly predicted the expert's split-second movement and struck the light mech's face head-on with a high-powered laser.

This time, the expert mech suffered a substantial blow, as its head enjoyed much less armor than its other parts. Even though the damage was largely cosmetic, Ghanso had literally slapped the expert mech's face.

The uber-fast light mech bayed for his blood.

Ghanso knew he pissed off the light mech for sure. He switched off all of his communication channels, which stopped the incessant calls to eject. "It's useless to eject. He'll chase after my cockpit and slice it apart."

In effect, he cut off his own escape route. He was fine with that. As the light mech neared his position, he grew increasingly excited. His warrior's blood called to him to meet the swordsman mech in earnest.

The Vhedra mech threw away its useless overheated rifle and let it drift away in space. Instead, it pulled out one single backup knife from its sheath.

The cheap, standard-alloy knife looked pitiful compared to the majestic sword in the light mech's hands. Ghanso's knife incorporated just enough low-quality exotic to hold up against compressed armor, if barely.

"I'll have to aim for its weak points. Stabbing its chest or back is useless."

Ghanso ignored the ridiculous thought of fending off an expert swordsman mech with an ordinary knife. Even as his death had become a near-certainty, his overwhelming hatred against the foreign expert reached a blinding height.

As the light mech rapidly surged towards the Vhedra, Ghanso closed his eyes and opened them to reveal his burning conviction.

"For the Republic!"

His weak Vhedra mech surged forth. Everything about his spaceborn mech had been optimized for ranged combat. His mech's own sluggishness provided an incredibly sharp contrast against the incoming light mech that was seconds away from slicing it in half.

"Come on! I can take you on!"

At the final second, just as Ghanso secretly resigned himself to death, a blazing hot jet of flames passed over his Vhedra's head. The light mech had barreled straight towards Ghanso's mech with its full momentum pressing forward.

Even though it rolled aside at the very last moment, half of the mech suffered heavy burns from the extremely jet of flames.

Ghanso's communicator suddenly surged to life. An external override had forcibly connected it to a private channel. "You did good, kid, but that's no reason to throw away your life. Pull back and rejoin your squad. Leave the rest to me."

An orange striker mech flew past the paralyzed Vhedra's position and began to chase the alarmed enemy swordsman mech.

As a bona fide soldier of the Mech Corps, Ghanso knew each and every expert pilot by name and mech. He recognized the orange striker as the characteristic Fire Worm.

Venerable Stanton Drake had saved his life!

Just as Ghanso came to terms with that fact, his attention turned to the battle at hand. Two other expert mechs had joined Venerable Drake in occupying the enemy expert mechs. At this stage, any help from the Volari Starhawks did more harm than good, as they could easily hit their own experts as they engaged in close-quarters combat with the enemy elites.

Therefore, Ghanso and the rest received orders to disengage from the sphere formation and rejoin the larger battle against the hordes of regular pirates.

As Ghanso unwillingly turned the Vhedra away, he kept glancing over to the duel between Venerable Drake and the enemy swordsman mech.

It was no contest, really. Striker mechs always countered melee mechs. This basic rule held true on land as much as in space. Every time the expert light mech tried to approach the Fire Worm, Venerable Drake spat out another deadly jet of highly potent flames.

The light mech lacked the capacity to suffer many blows from the intense heat. Its inability to take the flames head on constrained the expert mech to such an extent it had turned into a whipped dog.

Even as the light mech tried to disengage from the striker, the Fire Worm aggressively chased after the foreign mech.

The wide area of its jets of flames gave the light mech a lot of grief. Unlike a laser beam which only required a minor bump to dodge, the wider flames forced it to go through extreme lengths to escape its area of effect.

As Ghanso came off his high, he shook his head in disappointment. The light mech still possessed the edge in speed, so it would likely be able to shrug off the Fire Worm eventually.

Experts rarely perished in battle.

Chapter 323 Keep Your Enemy Closer

Back aboard the Happy Jelly, Ves constantly monitored the situation in space. He even turned his attention to the expert pirate mechs when they flew into range.

Their incredible performance and amazing construction dazzled his imagination. He continuously tried to figure out their principles but failed to make any progress beyond some rudimentary generalizations.

"My study into metaphysics and exotic alloys are still too shallow for me to understand designs at this level."

He still had a long way to go before he reached the threshold of understanding and designing his own expert mech.

And this was just the start of elite mechs. Ace mech pilots and god mech pilots demanded their own specialized machines in order to make full use of their strengths.

The ambition welling inside Ves kept burning brighter as he witnessed the extraordinary performance of each expert mech. The battle became much more exciting once the Mech Corps sent out their own experts.

Only three arrived because they hardly required additional help. The Mech Corps sent out the Fire Worm against the pirate swordsman mech because it directly countered its type.

In the same vein, they sent out an expert skirmisher to deal with the enemy rifleman mech and an expert rifleman to suppress the enemy space knight.

"Even experts can't escape the limitations of their type." Ves concluded as he witnessed the pirate mechs getting beaten back by the well-chosen expert mechs from the Republic.

The pirates only had themselves to blame for sending out their expert pilots first. The main reason it took so long for the Mech Corps to respond was because they kept their experts back in their hangars until they saw fit to deploy them. They could have sent twice as many experts, but that would have revealed their trump cards.

Neither Ves nor the Mech Corps forgot that the Mech Legion constantly monitored their performance.

The Brighters and the Vesians continuously fended off the pirate waves as they neared each other's position. No matter how many mechs the pirate alliances threw at them, they never managed to break through their defensive lines.

Though the pirates continuously bled the ranks of both military fleets, they suffered at least twice as much casualties in return. Eventually, their cowardice overshadowed their greed, and many of them cut and run without a hint of any organized retreat.

Still, it mattered little as the Mech Corps wasn't in a shape to pursue. The pirates pushed them close to their breaking point and required a lot of rest and replenishment before they regained their strength.

The battle against the pirates had ended, but the struggle against the Mech Legion only started from here. With the pirate alliances in disarray, they failed to stop the two military fleets before they converged.

Naturally, the Mech Corps kept its distance from the ships and mechs of their rivals. A tense half hour went by as the commanders of the two fleet negotiated behind the scenes. Once they came to an accord, the two fleets flew closer, but not enough to merge their assets into a single whole.

Rather than consider their formation a combined fleet, Ves figured it was more as if they reluctantly chose to use the same bathroom at once. The Brighters and the Vesians hardly trusted each other to maintain their current state of ceasefire.

The only question was who would pull the trigger first.

"Sparks will fly at the end of this retreat." He surmised. Once the fleets reached the edge of the Glowing Zone, they'd be able to engage their FTL drives and transition back to friendly territory. "I bet the Vesians can't resist at that point."

Until then, the two fleets benefited more if they held back their animosity for each other. THE only way the massive blob of ships and mechs could deter the pirates from launching another attack was to present a united front.

As of now, none of the pirate fleets had dared to stand in their way as the two fleets slingshotted their way out of orbit. The extra speed granted by their maneuver made it difficult for other fleets to catch up to them unless they followed a similar trajectory.

Of course, this would betray their intentions and potentially isolate them for a devastating counter-attack.

"So no one chased in the end." Ves remarked as he turned away from the plot. Nothing more exciting would happen for a few days.

Fadah crossed his arms and leaned back against an empty container. "The pirates are greedy, but they aren't stupid. As long as the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion split up, they could conceivably overwhelm any single one of their fleets. The moment that possibility went out the window, the pirates don't have a reason to pester us anymore. They'd be able to harvest much more riches from the surface of the planet."

"They still lost way too much mechs in this campaign. Even if they bloodied the nose of the Mech Corps, it doesn't change the fact that they've lost a hundred-thousand mechs or more."

Thinking about such an astounding loss of mechs quaked his heart. Ves could not even imagine the amount of lives and money the pirates discarded in their ultimately futile attempts at stealing someone else's gains. It would have made some sense if they attacked an isolated mercenary corps, but where did they summon the courage to fight against the Mech Corps directly.

"Sometimes, it's worth it. Everyone knows the Mech Corps harvested big, to the tune of earning trillions of credits worth of exotics. Felling a single ore-laden transport ship is enough for a gang of pirates to live like kings for the rest of their lives."

Ves truly couldn't get a grip around such a remark. It all sounded reasonable, but the pirates had to be a special brand of stupid to think they could vanquish the Mech Corps without paying a ruinous price.

"That's another thing you don't understand, Ves. The pirates don't mind all of the losses. As long as not too much of their own men lose their lives, they're fine with throwing away so many mechs. The fewer their numbers, the bigger their share. Don't you want to eat a whole pie instead of just a razor-thin slice?"

That really made Ves speechless. Pirates never cared or trusted any of their colleagues. Their greed had grown to such an extent that they would easily kill their fellow comrades if they could get away with it, all to pursue the greatest share of booty as possible.

"You seem to know a lot about pirates, Fadah. Have you..."

The older man grimaced. "I'm not a pirate and I never was, if that's what you're wondering."

Although Ves tried to pry the truth out of Fadah, the man remained obstinately silent. He obviously had a bad history with pirates, and it was very personal to him. Ves wondered if he lost a wife or children to a pirate attack.

"Alright, let's get back to work. The Vesians won't act friendly forever."

Fadah took the words right out of his mouth. Ves dropped the topic as the man walked away. At least he was right in one thing. The Vesians would tear down this facade in time. He'd better get the two spaceborn mechs fixed up.

Ves spent the next two days performing maintenance on the Harrier and the other spaceborn mech. Both mechs barely suffered any damage in the previous battle, though that was mostly because played second fiddle to the Mech Corps.

The lack of major damage allowed Ves to introduce a couple of modifications to both mechs. He mainly emphasized their ability to track incoming missiles. Considering the Vesian obsession with missiles, he found the precaution to be prudent.

The modifications hardly required his personal intervention once he fabricated the extra parts in the Happy Jelly's workshop. By now, he retrained the mech technicians just enough to be able to follow his instructions.

After making up his mind about allowing the mech technicians to work without his supervision, he exited the workshop and sought out Melkor. He found him in his bunk, where he quietly inspected the records of the previous battles in space and on the ground.

"We haven't been in touch lately." Ves said as he sat next to his cousin on the bed. "What are you studying?"

"I'm tracking the behavior of the different pirate alliances. Each of them favor different strategies. You already know about the Dragons of the Void for example. They treat their slaves like they are trash. They're happy to sacrifice an entire mech company if it can earn them a net profit of only ten million credits."

Melkor patiently pointed out the traits of the other pirate groups, from the Event Horizon Specters who favored stealth and misdirection to Ballard's Brutes who employed the most heavy mechs of all.

"This all sounds interesting, but what does that have to do with us?"

"Have you counted their numbers? How many pirates have shown up until now? This is only a fraction of their true numbers. They possess enough power to threaten the Bright Republic as a whole, especially if they band together with the Vesians. Can you imagine what will happen if we are attacked by both forces at once?"

That sent a chill through his spine. Ves could hardly imagine the amount of devastation that would ensue from such a conflict. However, he quickly dismissed the possibility once he remembered some important rules.

"The MTA will never let the pirates get away with such a brazen invasion. They consider them an enemy of all mankind. The main reason why they're so difficult to exterminate is because they are always dispersed. Once they

concentrate their numbers, it'll become trivial for the Mech Corps to mop them all up."

"That's true." Melkor reluctantly nodded. "Yet that's only the case if the MTA has the mechs and ships to spare. What if something else draws away their attention?"

"Even then, the pirates will pay. If not now, then years from now. Besides, as an accomplice to pirates, the Vesia Kingdom won't escape retribution either."

That last point poked a big hole in Melkor's theory. The Vesians wouldn't have the guts to collaborate with pirates. They'd make an enemy of the entire human race!

Still, Melkor didn't relinquish his suspicions. "Maybe I'm wrong about this specific instance, but I still think I'm on the right track. I've been trained to spot patterns and all my instincts are telling me that there's a conspiracy afoot."

That didn't sound very encouraging to Ves. "To be frank, I've witnessed some signs as well. It's difficult for me to conclude anything solid, but the pirates are definitely an important part of what is to come."

Ves could never forget that more than a year ago, he and Dietrich stumbled across an illegal underground production facility that successfully developed gamma laser rifles.

Even though the pirates ordinary considered themselves lawless, they almost never dared to break one of the MTA and CFA's important taboos. Using any prohibited weapon like gamma lasers and nuclear weapons instantly brought down the full wrath of the MTA down upon their heads.

The MTA maintained a strong presence on almost every major planet exactly for this purpose. They did not hesitate to mobilize trillions worth of assets to annihilate a trivial pirate gang once it began to dabble in forbidden weaponry.

Still, as invincible as the MTA appeared, even they had their limits. The MTA allocated most of their strength in the galactic center. They maintained a fairly robust presence in the galactic heartland, but the galactic rim had always been something of an afterthought for the highly centralized organization.

If Melkor suggested that the MTA's presence in the Komodo Star Sector could be neglected, then Ves couldn't dismiss it out of hand. However, who would actually dare to fight against the MTA directly?

Chapter 324 Unease

The pirates left behind in orbit of the Glowing Planet turned their attention to themselves and started to fight over the spoils left behind.

This truly showcased the lack of integrity among their ilk. The moment they lacked a common enemy, the gangs that made up their alliances broke apart like like a meteor falling through atmosphere.

The smarter pirate fleets had already pulled back from the Glowing Planet. Ves found to his regret that the Dragons of the Void had begun to pull back even before the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion linked up.

In any case, Ves enjoyed a rare moment of peace as the Happy Jelly made her way to the edge of the Glowing Zone.

Along the way, they stumbled along a couple of smaller pirate vessels that had sought to park themselves out of the way from the most contested regions. These outfits and lone wolves instantly moved out of the way of the allied fleets and never turned back.

If even the massive pirate alliances hadn't managed to beat them above the Glowing Planet, then nothing else stood a chance.

"Looks like we can definitely rule out any more shenanigans from the pirates." Ves observed as he took a look at the plot. "It's a shame they're too scared to pressure us further. They're the only reason the Mech Corps and the Mech

Legion haven't started shooting each other yet. I think it's time we take some precautions."

"Precautions? What for?" A mech technician scratched his skinny head.

"They're maintaining a steady fifty kilometer distance from our fleet."

"Fifty kilometers is nothing in space. That's enough distance to allow any laser to hit our ships with perfect accuracy. Even if the Happy Jelly is juking back and forth to hinder any predictions, it's not going to help us a lot at this distance. We're too close."

His pronouncement depressed the joy that ran throughout the Whalers for making it out of the Glowing Planet alive. A significant amount of mech pilots had met their end on that rock.

No one was in the mood to fight another battle. Ves noticed that everyone instinctively avoided thinking about the possibility of clashing with the Mech Legion, so he took it upon himself to kick the Whalers out of their potentially fatal complacency.

"Look, we plan for the worst and hope for the best. There's a chance the Mech Legion is just as fed up with fighting as we are, but we can't make that assumption. The Mech Legion hates our guts and wants nothing more than to destroy the Republic and take away our stars."

Ves eventually got through the mech technicians that they had plenty of work to do. He presented them with a projection of the Happy Jelly's schematics.

"I've prepared some plans to repair and strengthen the Happy Jelly's structure with the supplies and scrap we have on hand. We don't have the time to apply all of these fixes, but every little bit helps us make it through the final fight."

An older female ship crew frowned as she studied the schematics. "Some of this looks really complicated. Did you come up with these plans yourself?"

"I've spent some time aboard large machines. While I don't specialize in starships, there are plenty of things in common to all machines. I'm mainly focused on strengthening the Happy Jelly's structural integrity, so there is little need to disrupt the delicate internal workings of the carrier."

To be honest, Ves did not have any confidence he could improve any of the Jelly's badly maintained functions. The FTL drive especially looked iffy. He was afraid that if he bumped into it once, it would malfunction entire and leave them stranded in local space.

After some convincing, the mech technicians and ship technicians went to work. Ves did all he could now to prepare the Happy Jelly for the coming the fight. He had his own preparations to make.

He returned to his bunk and looked at the flashing orb placed on his bed. "I miss you, Lucky."

His cat finally couldn't hold his evolution back. The moment it became clear that they made it off the Glowing Planet, Lucky curled in on himself and extruded an unknown white material around himself to begin his level up process.

Basically, he turned back into an egg.

Ves didn't dare to stroke the egg with his bare hands. He first let his antigrav clothes cover his hand with a glove before he dared to caress its bone-like surface.

"This feels a lot like Rorach's Bone."

The resemblance to bone made the egg feel truly real. Only the lines of glowing blue crisscrossing the surface of the egg made it clear that the egg possessed a mechanical aspect.

"I know you can't help it, but I really wish you'd waited with this level up."

Once the Happy Jelly began to move away from the Glowing Planet, they traveled out of range of its insidious energy fields, including the one responsible for the Overcharge phenomenon. Every overcharged energy cell slowly lost their excess charge and turned back to normal, though in the perspective of the energy cells, nothing had changed at all.

Lucky must have noticed that he began to lose his temporary condition, so he immediately decided to evolve as soon as the immediate danger subsided.

Unfortunately, this left Ves without his closest companion and bodyguard. He had always relied on Lucky to keep him safe against any threats on foot.

"For now, I'll only be able to rely on Melkor and my shiny new toy."

Ves activated his Privacy Shield and retrieved the Amastendira from his Inventory and put it in one of his pockets. He did not wish to reveal the System's ability to materialize and dematerialize objects in a possible fight.

A couple of days went by as thousands of ships boosted their way out of the Glowing Zone. The further they traveled from the Glowing Planet, the weaker its influence on local space.

The amount of naturally occurring spacetime anomalies had decreased to such an extent that they ceased to be a threat.

This was not good news.

Previously, the Mech Legion might have scruples about launching an assault. If they sent out their mechs towards the Mech Corps, they'd have to cross a brief No Man's Land where they wouldn't be covered by the dimensional smoothers.

After that, they'd have to rely on their enemy's dimensional smoother to keep them safe from the ravages of spacetime. The Mech Corps could easily decide to shut one off to spite the attackers.

Now that they flew several light-hours away from the dangerous planet, they had nothing to be afraid of anymore. An attack could come at any moment from either the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion.

Even if the Mech Corps enjoyed some bolstering by the Blood Claws and the other major outfits, they did not possess too much strength in space. Gangs mostly focused on controlling valuable territory. Therefore, they invested mostly in their landbound capabilities.

The mercenary corps who signed up with the Mech Corps fared better in this regard. Mercenaries always found stable gigs working as escorts in trade convoys.

Still, their relatively smaller scale meant that they'd be looking out for themselves. Nobody had the energy or motivation to spare some consideration for the Happy Jelly.

"We've got to save ourselves."

To his disappointment, the Whalers failed to keep up their vigilance after a day. The campaign on the ground had truly exhausted them to the bone.

Sometimes, Ves considered whether he went overboard. The odds of an attack would not be very great if the Mech Legion possessed little advantage.

"The Vesians are aggressive, but they aren't stupid. They won't start a fight they can't win."

Both fleets possessed roughly equal strength. The Mech Corps had more dependents to soak up the damage while the Mech Legion formed a more cohesive whole. His discussions with Melkor helped him figure out the most likely course of action by the Vesians.

"The carriers of the Mech Corps are tough and still in good shape for the most part. The Mech Legion won't easily be able to crack their shells. It's us who

should be worrying about a surprise attack." Melkor tapped his foot against the deck of the ship. "Converted carriers like the Happy Jelly are tin cans waiting to be peeled. Once the gangs and mercenary vessels start to fall, a panic will ensue."

Ves easily imagined such a possibility. "If you can think about it, the Mech Corps has it figured out as well."

"Even if that's the case, they won't go out of their way to save us if we're in trouble. Knowing about a vulnerability and doing something about it are two completely different things. Trust me, I know how the Mech Corps works. They take a dim view on gangs and mercenary corps. Any suggestion that they should reinforce their hired help will be shut down by their leadership."

He could not dismiss Melkor's judgement of the Mech Corps. The man had trained in their ranks for several years. He should know what he was talking about.

From his own interaction with the Mech Corps, Ves considered them to be an organization that was swamped with responsibility. They had way too many fires to put out and too few firefighters to address every crisis.

The unease among the crew grew as they neared the edge of the Zone. Home and safety came within reach. They'd just have to make the final stretch before they could return to their homes with a full haul of highly valuable ores.

As Ves put down a wrench on the toolbox hovering next to him, he rose up to his feet after putting the deck back together. He had just added a couple of redundant safeties to the channels running below this corridor.

He activated his comm and pulled up the schematic of the ship to see what else needed to be done. As he scanned the up-to-date readout, his eyes flicked over to the lower decks.

He remembered assigning someone to reinforce the compartment next to the cargo bay. By now, the job should have been done. Was the guy sleeping on the job again?

Ves tried to contact the tech. "Yavic, come on. Wake up!"

Strangely enough, his signal went nowhere. Yavic's comm might have glitched. Ves tried to contact another crew member who worked at the lower decks.

"Simmons, are you there? Pick up the call, please."

Again, nothing happened. His comm messages successfully routed to the lower decks, upon which they disappeared into a black hole. He tried contacting other people assigned to the lower decks but came up with a disconcerting lack of responses.

A bad feeling crept up behind his back. He slammed his comm and activated an emergency transmission that he'd programmed beforehand. "Alert, I can't reach the lower decks! I highly suspect that this is no regular malfunction but deliberate sabotage! Enemies have sneaked aboard the Happy Jelly! I suggest you sound the alarm at once!"

He sent out the message to Walter, Fadah, Melkor and a couple of other people. They'd be able to check up on his claims and bring the ship to readiness.

As for Ves, he left behind his floating toolbox and sprinted back to his bunk. After glancing at Lucky's egg, he approached the hazard suit he placed in the corner and entered it from behind.

"A hazard suit is not as protective as an exoskeleton suit, but it's better than nothing."

He mainly wore the suit in case he got ejected into space. With the miniature thrusters and the magnetic harpoons built into the suit, he'd still be able to fly back to the Happy Jelly if he'd been launched off the ship for some reason.

He unfolded the Amastendira and wielded it with his gauntleted grip. He felt dangerous wielding such a prized mastercrafted weapon. The sheer amount of luxury and class exuded by the ornate laser pistol contrasted sharply with his utilitarian-looking hazard suit.

The last thing he did before he left his bunk was to put Lucky's egg inside a padded crash safe. After that, he stepped out and intended to link up with Melkor and the rest.

"I'd be a fool to walk down to the lower decks."

He wondered why the alarm hadn't been sounded as of yet. By now, the crew of the Happy Jelly should have figured out if they'd been boarded.

Suddenly, the entire ship shut off. Every light and every system ceased to function. Moments later, a handful of backup systems went online. The ominous red lights cast the corridors in a dangerous light.

Much of the existing life support systems remained offline. If the ship couldn't get its ventilation and oxygen generators back online, those without a suit would suffocate within a day.

"Damnit! They got to engineering!"

Chapter 325 Lending

The only way a group of hostile boarders could disable every system at once was if they had taken control of the bridge or engineering. Ves guessed they'd taken the latter.

Communications fell out as well. Ves tried to contact anyone on the short-range bands, but all he met was static. "They're jamming us as well!"

Ves had been reduced to mustering up the panicking crew members that had been running around like headless chickens.

"Get your heads back together! This is no time to give in to your hysteria!" He shouted at the clueless men and women in the nearby compartments. His hazard suit amplified his voice for further reach. "Get into your hazard suits and grab a weapon! Take up your battle stations and wait for someone to take charge!"

That set the nearby Whalers back on track. One of the deficiencies of the Whalers was that the rank-and-file rarely had a clue what to do in the absence of solid leadership. Most of the senior Whalers such as Walter and Fadah hung around in the mech stables or the upper decks. That left much of the middle and lower decks with a critical absence of direction.

Frankly, even a six-year old kid could take charge if he pretended to be authoritative enough.

Ves did not attempt to browbeat them into following him. He was not a proper leader and he did not wish to be responsible if his decisions led to their deaths.

He jogged towards the stairs and went down to the workshop first. He repeated the same actions as he had done last time whenever he met a confused assembly of crewmen. It hadn't truly sunk in yet that they'd been boarded and sabotaged.

Once they realized the Happy Jelly had partially succumbed Mech Legion, Ves had to be firm in his tone in order to avoid infecting the crew with his concerns.

Even though he warned them time and time again to prepare for an attack, the Whalers aboard the Happy Jelly never expected the Vesians to go for a

boarding action. That threw them completely off-guard. How could they have sneaked aboard their ship without getting spotted on approach?

Whatever the case, the enemy had already managed to get onboard. His main priority should be to contain the Vesians and prevent them from dealing any catastrophic damage to engineering.

Once he reached the workshop compartment, he finally met with Melkor. He wore a light combat suit this time and wielded a borrowed rifle. He looked much more prepared to square off against the enemies than the Whalers themselves.

"Melkor! You're here! Good."

"Yes, it's dangerous for you to be running around without Lucky! Get inside the workshop and hide in a locker or something!"

"Not this time. I can fight, and you need me to figure out if anything is wrong at engineering."

The two had a brief argument about it but Ves convinced Melkor to let him go along. "If I die, then it's my own fault, but I won't accept sitting on the sidelines while the fate of the Happy Jelly is at stake!"

"We can still eject, you know." Melkor pointed out. "The escape pods run completely separate from the ship."

"I don't think you're okay with back down without a fight. So am I. We lose this ship, we lose more than a couple of mechs and some ores. This is the heart of Walter's Whalers. Besides, there's no guarantee that the ships flying next to us aren't compromised as well."

Ves lost the ability to check up on the situation out in space when most of the systems shut down. The Mech Corps and the Mech Legion could be embroiled in an epic clash and he had no way of telling it went on. Without a

better picture of what was happening throughout the entire fleet, Ves refused to give up on the Happy Jelly.

The lack of communications made coordination extraordinarily difficult. Eventually, Fadah came around and gathered a couple of mech pilots and brave men into an impromptu squad.

"This will do. We are running out of time. Let's move out immediately." Fadah said as he walked up with his own light combat suit.

While these lightly armored suits failed to measure up against proper exoskeleton suits, they offered much better protection than hazard suits.

Ves saw that everyone else wore hazard suits, which disappointed him somewhat. They'd be torn down by enemy fire.

At least Ves still had his old shield generator to back him up. It still held an eighty percent charge, which was more than enough to fend off two or three attacks by a mech.

As Ves followed the squad while holding on to his Amastendira, Melkor slowed down his pace and came to his side. "Where did you get this gun?"

"Uh, it's a gift."

"It looks powerful and expensive, like an import from the New Rubarth Empire. Do you even know how to use this gun?"

"I passed my basic training course when I studied at Rittersberg!"

Melkor shook his head inside his helmet and held out his gauntlet. "That thing will kill you if you handle it poorly. Give it to me. I can make much better use of this weapon."

To be honest, Ves really did not wish to relinquish the Amastendira. He had just received it a couple of days ago and looked forward to putting its impressive capabilities to the test.

He wanted to shoot the Vesians himself and save the Happy Jelly like a hero from the dramas. This was his gun. Why should he give it away?

Eventually, his logic and reason overruled his ego and desires. As much as he wanted to play the hero, he had no illusions that he could wield the pistol effectively. It might have been different if Pierre Femento incorporated aim assist into the Amastendira, but the man only had master marksmen in mind when he designed the gun.

A weapon only reached its potential when used by someone with the skill to back it up. Ves knew that more than most due to his profession as a mech designer.

Thus, with extreme reluctance, Ves handed over the Amastendira to Melkor. His cousin holstered the laser rifle to the back of his light combat suit, which magnetically held it in place.

"It's locked."

"Oh, let me program you in." Ves replied and took back the Amastendira long enough to add Melkor's biometrics to its security systems.

Not anyone would be able to take off with his valuable possession. The Amastendira had a nasty surprise in store if an enemy attempted to pick it up. Supposedly, the weapon was smart enough to distinguish between allies and enemies, though Ves had no clue how the automated systems inside the weapon accomplished such a feat.

Once Ves added Melkor as an authorized user of the gun, he carefully handed it over.

Melkor treated the weapon like a lover and a piece of art. The way he deftly navigated the weapon's projected display and rapidly skirted over its specs made it clear that he was no slouch with infantry weapons.

"This weapon is crazy. This is the kind of toy a noble of the New Rubarth Empire would wield!"

"I know. It's actually a replica of some sorts. Compared to the original, this copy still falls a little short."

"A little short? Hah! I can carve my way through an entire pirate ship with this gun!"

Ves frowned as Melkor visibly grew more excited about the Amastendira. It was as if Melkor seduced his wife!

"Hey, try not to fondle it too much! This is still my gun. I'll lend it to you whenever we're together, but make sure to give it back to me when we're out of danger."

"Oh, uhm, sure."

After walking down a lot of flights of stairs, the group of motley Whalers arrived at the deck that led to engineering. Fadah, who took the lead, slowed down.

"We're lucky we haven't met the Vesians yet, but it's highly likely the Vesians are on this deck. Let's crawl forward and take it slow."

Ves immediately interjected. "We can't afford to take it slow. The Vesians have control over engineering and who knows what they're up to. Once they decide to destroy the FTL drive, we have no way of returning home unless we abandon ship. We have to move faster!"

"Look I respect you, but you're a nerd. I'm the one in charge around here." Fadah pushed back. "I'm not about to waste the lives of my men by moving too fast. We need to scout them out first and figure out if they've split up."

All of it sounded too conservative. Ves did not know where Fadah's characteristic daring had gone to. The man acted like a daredevil in the

cockpit. Without the comfort of his mech, the older Whaler turned into a timid mouse.

"Fine. I'll do it myself." Ves turned to Melkor and opened a private communication channel with his suit. "Remember the time when we got ambushed in the streets of Bentheim?"

"Yes. You pulled off something remarkable with your comm. Can you do it again?"

"I can stealth us, yes. It will last shorter than last time, though. Do you think you can make use of five minutes worth of complete stealth?"

His cousin considered the matter for a few seconds. "It will be tough. We can make it to engineering from here in that time, but we won't have enough time to scope out the enemy. We'll have to go into action immediately."

"Time is of the essence. I'm really worried at what the Vesians are cooking up in engineering. The Happy Jelly's FTL drive can't take any abuse."

They decided to move out immediately. Ves spent a couple of seconds to inform Fadah of their intentions before he engaged his stealth augment. Ves and Melkor's armored suits turned invisible before Fadah could let out a word of protest.

"Damn these Larkinsons and their toys!"

Despite their hasty movements, the stealth augment muffled all of their sounds and vibrations. If any pirates had been in the way, they would have been completely oblivious about the presence that ran past their bodies.

They reached the hatch that led to engineering with roughly a minute to spare. The only problem was that the boarders had locked it shut.

"Damnit!" Ves cursed. "I should have figured the Vesians barricaded this compartment! This is one of the best-protected portion of the ship. There's no

way I can circumvent this barrier in a couple of minutes. A plasma cutter will take at least half a day to get through the hatch."

Melkor suddenly pulled Ves away from the hatch. "Stand back. Let me take care of hatch."

"What are you doing?! Don't shoot it at high power inside a ship!"

Sadly, his cousin didn't listen to him. Melkor dialed the power setting a couple of notches away from maximum power and fired a bright golden beam that burned a hole straight through the hatch and continued on to damage anything placed behind.

The pistol continued to emit a beam, and Melkor quickly aimed the weapon in the rough shape of a box before the weapon ran out of steam.

"Huh. I underestimated its power. This is a really fine weapon." Melkor praised the Amastendira before he kicked down the cutout he made from the hatch.

As the alloy block fell down, a number of menacing black exoskeleton suits trained their weapon on the entrance.

"There's only forty seconds left on my stealth augment! It's running out of power!"

"There's nothing to it, then. Follow me when I move in."

Even though Melkor just fired a massively overpowered pistol, the stealth field still worked as usual. One of the best aspects about the Amastendira was that it shunted almost all of its excess heat into its dimensional heat sink. It only worked up to a certain point, but it was more than capable of absorbing the heat of a single high-powered beam.

"Alright, let's go!"

Ves and Melkor sneaked through the hole as the exoskeleton-suited assailants puzzled over whether someone would still show up. Neither their

visuals nor their other sensors revealed the source of the intimidating laser cannon that had cut through the hatch.

They had no idea what kind of danger slipped inside engineering.

Chapter 326 Cut Down

When Melkor and Ves barged into engineering, they turned slightly and approached a ramp which gave a commanding view of the entire compartment. While Melkor took up a prime position to shoot down all of the huddled exoskeleton-suited intruders, Ves looked around the chamber for any signs of sabotage.

He spotted two alarming observations.

First, they placed something that looked a lot like explosives on the FTL drive. Ves found it funny that the boarding party went through the trouble of affixing its exterior with explosives when they could easily wreck it with a hefty kick from their exoskeletons.

Second, a Vesian tech specialist seemed to be digging deep into the central control console. The corpse of the previous head engineer bleeding out next to the console must have granted them access to the controls. Or, they might have hacked its outdated security settings.

Whatever the case, Ves had to deal with both these dangers quickly. The reason why he accompanied Melkor into engineering was because he was deeply afraid of just these kinds of tricks.

The moment the hostiles realized they couldn't hold their position, they wouldn't hesitate to destroy the power reactor or the FTL drive, or induce them in a manner that would blow up the entire Happy Jelly.

Ves bumped Melkor's combat suit and gestured towards the FTL drive. He held up his old laser pistol to show his cousin that he could handle himself.

Even if Melkor held some misgivings about his presence here, the stealth augment had almost run its course.

No time for second guesses.

"Go!"

Once the stealth augment ran out of power, Ves sprinted for the FTL drive while Melkor pulled the trigger of the Amastendira.

Another massive, long-duration laser beam extended out of the barrel of the mastercrafted weapon. Melkor ran the entire beam along the engineering bay like a scythe cutting through wheat. More than half-dozen armored boarders lost their lives when the super-powered laser beam cut right through their military grade exoskeleton armor.

Entire bodies split in half along with their armor and any gear they carried. Instantly, Melkor neutralized over two-thirds of the threat in the compartment!

To their credit, the survivors responded swiftly to Melkor's sudden appearance. They snapped their rifles and wrist-mounted lasers at his position and barraged his position until the ramp became filled with holes.

"Agh!"

While Melkor had already begun to run, he still got hit by their uncannily accurate return fire. His light combat suit suffered a nasty series of burns and crater marks, wearing away the thin layers of armor until he dove into cover behind a thick enclosure.

One of the Vesians lifted up a launcher and fired a series of grenades at Melkor's position, causing him to jump away in haste. All the while, he fired shorter bursts of high-powered beams straight through the cover of his opponents.

At this power setting, nothing could stand in the way of the Amastendira. Though its power reserves rapidly drained and its heat capacity started to get overwhelmed, Melkor icily took out one exoskeleton soldier after another.

If he had to resort to his standard laser rifle, he might have needed to strike the same location five times in a row to get through the thick infantry-scaled armor.

Though the Vesians put up a good fight, their numbers rapidly dwindled to the extent where they sought to activate their failsafes. The commanding officer of the boarding party sent out a signal and expected an explosion, only to be met with nothing of the sorts.

"I disarmed the explosives!" Ves yelled to Melkor as he detached the last explosive charge from the exterior of the FTL drive and threw it in a random corner.

Though the charges still posed a threat, he successfully disabled their receivers. Right now he ran towards the console and shot at the tech specialist who had been forced to disengage from the controls.

"Damn it, this gun is really no comparison to the Amastendira." Ves cursed as he engaged in a stale and anemic standoff against the specialist.

The Vesian tech specialist obviously received more training than Ves, and he slowly got the upper hand. He already struck Ves' hazard suit a number of times, which melted away a significant slice of civilian-grade armor.

Compared to how Melkor systematically dismantled the Vesian soldiers, the fight between Ves and the tech specialist resembled a kiddie fight.

Ves became increasingly suppressed to the point where he didn't dare to emerge from cover. "Melkor! Help me out here!"

Seconds later, a bright beam of gold punched through the tech specialist's cover and vaporized his entire torso. His combat suit posed no impediment at all against the fury of a mastercrafted weapon.

The casual shot had taken almost no effort at all, though Melkor got into a sticky situation when the survivors tried to retreat from the engineering bay. As he chased after the stragglers, Ves approached the command console and tried to restore power to the Happy Jelly.

"Come on, don't tell me you've given up the ghost!"

Though Ves only understood half of what the command console spat out, he still figured out that engineering had become a mess. The tech specialist had been rooting through the core settings doing who knew what.

In addition, the earlier battle also ruined many secondary systems in the engineering bay. It was a miracle that Melkor's liberal use of the Amastendiria hadn't struck anything vital like the engine, fuel supply or FTL drive.

Still, his work aboard large vessels like the Happy Jelly and the Gregarious Wrath had given him plenty of pointers on how these vehicles worked. After a couple of minutes of kludging, he managed to spool up the power reactors and reconnect them to the rest of the carrier.

As Ves worked the controls, the motley crew led by Fadah finally showed up. The Whalers stopped in their track as soon as they saw the carnage. Wide stretches of scorch marks and molten alloys crisscrossed the entire chamber.

What upset them the most was spotting the fallen corpses of the intimidating exoskeleton soldiers. Ordinarily, an entire squad of heavily armed Vesians would have chewed up the Whalers pretty good.

The fact that Ves and Melkor took them out alone while getting only scratches in return spoke wonders.

"Fadah, stay here and reinforce the engineering bay. I don't know if this is the only batch of Vesians aboard the Jelly. Remain alert."

"On it." Fadah nodded. He didn't quibble with Ves because he knew that their survival relied on holding engineering.

The lights switched from red to neutral aboard the entire ship. The Happy Jelly woke from her forceful slumber.

Not only did Ves restore the lights and life support systems, he also restored communications. He instantly contacted the bridge.

"Walter here! What's going down at engineering?!"

"Everyone's dead here. The Vesians kill everyone off and tried to sabotage the entire place, but Melkor and I have taken care them. I don't know how many Vesians remain, but engineering is safe for the time being."

"Good work, Larkinson. We're getting our bearings back on the bridge, but as far as we're aware of there are still a couple of uninvited guests aboard the ship. We're already sending out some men to sweep them up."

"What's the situation outside?" Ves suddenly asked.

"Not good. The Mech Legion has shed all pretences. Many ships are drifting away without power, while their missile mechs are pounding upon the fleet carriers of the Mech Corps."

Ves summoned up a plot of the local space and saw that the formerly neat arrangement of fleets had descended into a very divergent picture.

The Mech Legion largely maintained cohesion, but much of the allied ships of the Mech Corps suffered from sabotage. A handful of ships regained control, but dozens more blew up as their power reactors overloaded.

While the Vesians had caught the Mech Corps flat-footed, the Brighters launched their own surprise.

A handful of ships at the vanguard of the Mech Legion fleet ran into deadly stealth mines. Though the Mech Legion fleet swiftly changed course, the mines followed with them and turned into impromptu missiles that felled a number of smaller combat carriers.

The mines briefly disrupted the Mech Legion's tempo, allowing the Brighters to catch their breath. The battle transitioned from an ambush into a messy slugging match.

The Vesian Grand Chasers led the charge and clashed against the Brighter Volari Starhawks in the middle of the No Man's Land. Other mech regiments stuck to their fleets and engaged in a heated exchange of long-ranged fire.

From his limited tactical knowledge of battles in space, Ves tentatively concluded that neither side had gained a decisive lead.

Though the Mech Legion maintained a substantial advantage, their starting gambit focused mostly on the rabble that surrounded the ships of the Mech Corps. It mattered little if some tiny outfit like Walter's Whalers lost control of their ships, as the core strength of the Bright Republic's fleet still remained intact.

"The battle has turned into a slugging match! This is madness!"

If Ves was in charge, he would have pulled away. Neither side benefited from the losses they suffered. Ships lost propulsion and mechs continued to be obliterated in the cruel millstone of generational hatred.

Neither side had issued a formal declaration of war, but already they were going at it as if their entire state was at stake.

Walter growled on the other side of the communication channel. "Madness or not, we're in the thick of it now. The first thing we need to do is get back in formation. We've drifted off-course and we need to turn back around. Can you take charge in engineering?"

"I'll do the best I can, but I have no clue what I'm doing."

"Hang on for now while I round up all of the engineers who are still alive. Make sure that nothing breaks in the meanwhile!"

That was easier said than done. The Amastendiria had inflicted a lot of collateral damage. Ves called over a floating toolbox and began to clean up some of the damaged systems and prevent them from degrading even further.

In the meantime, a couple of engineers stationed elsewhere on the Happy Jelly entered the engineering bay and took stock of all of the damage.

Ves looked up from his repair job. "How's the damage? Can the Happy Jelly still fly?"

The ship engineers reluctantly nodded. "If we divert some power from other systems, she can still keep up with the fleet. I'm not so sure about jumping into FTL. The system that's responsible for calculating our navigational plots is cut in half."

That didn't prevent them from transitioning into FTL, but if they made any mistake in calculation, they risked getting lost in the sea of higher dimensions. They could end up thousands of light-years away from their original destination, or get sucked into a random stellar body like a star or a black hole.

"Let's worry about that later. For now, we have a ship to repair and a battle to survive!"

Everyone proceeded to put out the fires and assess the exact damage. From what Ves had seen so far, the Happy Jelly still had a lot of fight left in her. Most of her basic functions such as her in-system thrusters and her FTL drive sustained no damage, so there was no need to evacuate as of yet.

Once Melkor returned, Ves put down his tool and approached his cousin. "How's the rest of the ship? Did you catch the stragglers?"

"We cornered them in the cargo bay. Because of all the reactive exotics stored in that compartment, I couldn't shoot off my laser pistol willy nilly. It took a decent amount of effort to flank them and assault them from multiple directions."

Melkor had no need to tell Ves how that final stand ended. With the Amastendira, the Vesians stood no chance even if they took a couple of containers of exotics hostage.

"I think we don't have to worry about hostile boarders at this point. Both fleets are hammering each other apart with mechs right now. I'd feel safer if you hopped inside the Stanislaw and station yourself at the hangar bay's hatch."

The idea sounded a bit weak, but they couldn't employ the Stanislaw in any other way since it lacked a flight system. Melkor nodded inside his helmet and turned around. "I'll get on it."

"Wait a moment. Give me back my Amastendira!"

Chapter 327 Hatred

With only a little less than half a day away until they could transition into FTL, the two military fleets had already fallen out.

The amount of damage inflicted on both sides surpassed a value of billions of credits. Mechs continued to be destroyed at an unsustainable rate.

Sometimes, a combat carrier or two sustained major damage that caused them to drift out of formation. These losses were much more severe because the carriers had been constructed with premium materials that made them many times more expensive than a regular mech.

The loss of so much strategic assets on both sides grew more frigid once the expert mechs started showing up. The handful of expert pilots like Venerable

Stanton Drake fought above the the general battle as their mechs possessed the capacity to inflict ruinous damage against a group of standard mechs.

The Fire Worm especially received a lot of attention from the Vesians. They couldn't afford to let the Fire Worm devastate a huge swathe of the Mech Legion's ships with its wide-area flamethrowers.

Despite the intense clashes, neither side expected the battle to end quickly. Most fights between expert mechs lasted at least an hour or more if they held back their trump cards. For now, the experts mainly tried to constrain their counterparts from the other side.

This put the onus of the battle on the masses of regular mech pilots.

Melkor who stationed his Stanislaw next to the opened hangar hatch of the Happy Jelly mainly stood by and shot down any stray missile that flickered in his view. As a small and rusty converted carrier, the Happy Jelly hardly attracted any attention from the Mech Legion.

The two average mechs that guarded the carrier also impressed no one. Dietrich piloted his old Harrier and kept his mech's rifle in a tight grip as he looked at the explosions happening in the distance.

"This is crazy!"

Walter's Whalers experienced a handful of large battles before on the Glowing Planet. The pirates never really put up a decent fight due to their lack of discipline, training and quality.

This was different.

The Mech Legion consisted of several ducal regiments of similar quality to their counterparts of the Republic. Highly ambitious commoners made up the rank-and-file while officers trained from birth to command and lead these mechs were hungry to earn merits.

As long as commoners destroyed ten mechs without losing their own, they'd be elevated to knights, which was the first and lowest rank of nobility within the Vesia Kingdom. Once a commoner became a knight, many privileges and opportunities fell into their laps.

Thus, the mech pilots of the Mech Legion fought with much greater passion than the Mech Corps. The Bright Republic's mech pilots mainly served out of duty, and while they enjoyed a fair amount of rewards for each mech they took out, they paled in comparison.

"Larkinson! Focus on the squad of cannoneers. They're trying to take out our carriers!"

Ghanso Larkinson listened to the instructions of his captain and shifted the Vhedra's rifle until it lined up with the cannoneers. Even from this distance, he managed to cripple two mechs at once before they pulled back.

"Man, your aim is getting better and better!" One of his colleagues praised. The shots of the rifleman mechs barely scarred the armor plating of the cannoneer mechs.

Another volley of lasers spat out of the Vhedra's laser rifle. This time, Ghanso managed to nail a swordsman mech in the back just as it was about to assail a defenseless mech from the Volari Starhawks.

To be honest, Ghanso could barely explain why he improved all of a sudden. Many of his peers gained an edge after cutting their teeth against the pirates, but Ghanso had changed more drastically than most.

Everytime a mech pilot asked him how he did it, he responded with the same answer. "Shooting down a regular mech is easier than trying to scratch an expert mech."

Compared to that expert light mech that got chased away by the Fire Worm, every other mech moved so slow to his senses. It was as if every mech had

collectively decided to cut their speed in half. In those circumstances, Ghanso had been able to nail down every moving target no matter what kind of tricks they pulled off.

Unknown to him, a handful of observant officers of the Volari Starhawks marked him out as a possible expert pilot candidate.

Still, no matter how many mechs he mowed down, Ghanso was only one pilot among tens of thousands. His contribution hardly shifted the tenuous balance between the sides.

The battle between the Grand Chasers and the Volari Starhawks grew increasingly more heated. As the only two mech regiments to clash against each other in close range, the amount of casualties quickly piled up on both sides. All it took was one mistake to take out a mech.

The differences between the two regiments quickly became apparent. The Grand Chasers had left their bulky heavy mechs behind to guard their motherships in the main fleet of the Mech Legion.

Freed from the burden of their sluggish ships and heavy mechs, the mechs of the Grand Chasers tried to fly in circles around their adversaries. Their squads primarily consisted of light mechs. Each of them might not pack a lot of punch, but as long as enough mechs focused their fire upon the same target, they could systematically dismantle their opponents in quick succession.

Still, the Volari Starhawks refused to be their punching bags. Medium mechs made up most of their numbers, so they used that to their advantage to bull through the harassing fire and disrupt the rhythm of the circling mechs.

Meanwhile, the Happy Jelly sneakily slipped back into formation. The Mech Corps had assigned them in the periphery of the main fleet along with the rest of the ships from the Whalers and the Blood Claws.

Some of those ships suffered various mishaps due to sabotage. The Whalers lost one ship entirely while the Blood Claws lost six.

This frustrated the two gangs to no end. Many of those ships had been laden with exotics that could have been sold for a decent fortune. Their profitability took a sharp dive after sustaining such a loss.

"How is it possible for us to lose so many ships?" Ves asked in the open.

"Only fifteen or so exoskeleton soldiers boarded our carrier. I doubt the other ships faced more than that. How could the Vesians get the drop on us with such a minimal investment?"

No one in the engineering bay dared to answer his question. In truth, everyone knew that they'd been complacent at the possibility of a stealth insertion. They paid dearly for their lax approach against stealth insertions.

The battle had raged over an hour now. Thousands of mechs had met their end along the trail the fleets left behind. A couple of stray and derelict ships spun off into nowhere, though in many cases their crew and cargo had been transferred onto other ships if they survived.

As a mech designer who'd been raised away from the Larkinsons who'd been indoctrinated into serving the Republic, Ves increasingly grew disgusted about the battle.

Neither sides fought for any strategic reason other than to try and take their adversaries down a notch.

It was as if the Mech Legion and the Mech Corps consisted of two school children with an unreconciled grudge against each other. No matter how many times you tried to lecture them, they still came to blows if they were put in the same room.

"So many people are killed and so many mechs are destroyed at this moment." He lamented to himself as he kept an eye on the information being fed to the command console.

The engineers had made some critical repairs that brought back the functionality of some of the more salvageable damaged components. The Happy Jelly now regained ample power to keep her thrusters active at full capacity while keeping enough juice to run her other systems like life support.

Ves didn't even need to lend a hand with the repairs anymore, so he stuck to the command console and paid attention to the battle outside while he inspected the various incomprehensible databases for any signs of sabotage.

"I don't know what the tech specialist did, but I can't track down anything that looks amiss."

His Computer Science Skill mainly focused on mastering the programming of a mech. The programming that ran a large vessel like the Happy Jelly might use the same type of languages, but its structure was at least ten times more complex. Every element of the Happy Jelly's programming had been applied in a different direction from what Ves was accustomed to with mechs.

In short, Ves had no clue what he was doing. Neither did anyone else, for that matter.

When Ves asked someone to take over his post, the engineers replied that only the head engineer figured the system out. Everyone else treated the programming like an alien artifact.

He shook his head. "Idiots."

To be fair, the Happy Jelly did lose most of their most competent engineers. The remaining survivors lacked the experience and knowledge to work in engineering.

Instead, they'd been tasked with watching over the less important systems like the oxygen replenisher and water recycler. These kinds of figures yearned for simple jobs where all they had to do was to sleep on the job or play some games on their comm.

The only times they got off their lazy butts was if something had actually broken down.

Thus, Ves had no choice but to remain at the engineering bay for a time. While the surviving engineers required no further motivation as their lives were already at stake, he occasionally had to warn them if they tried anything dangerous or wrong.

The relative lack of excitement continued for another hour. The battle outside died down as the Volari Starhawks and the Grand Chasers pulled back at the same time. They sustained too many casualties in one bout, and most of their mechs had started overheating from the intense exertion of their weapons and flight systems.

Ves suddenly received a comm message.

"Get over to the hangar bay! The Harrier has just returned and it's in really bad shape!"

"Dietrich!"

Ves left the command console and walked out of the engineering bay. He ran through the corridors in his hazard with his Amastendira kept safe within a pocket. Once he reached the hangar bay, he took a look at the steaming mess of junk the Harrier had been reduced to.

A handful of mech technicians brought in heavy cutting tools and started grinding through the cockpit area.

"What happened to the Harrier?! Is Dietrich still alive?"

"He's alive, but the data says he has a concussion!" A mech technician responded quickly as he tried to bore through the cockpit.

Ves shook his head and made a choice. "That will take too long. Let me try something."

Once he floated above the cockpit, Ves mentally recalled the schematics of the mech. The Harrier featured a typical reverse-V cockpit system where the thick, robust chest plating swiveled outward. This left open a gap near the neck area where a mech pilot would be able to enter and exit the hatch at the top of the cockpit.

This type of entry system gained a bad reputation because it was easy to jam the swivel procedure. Right now, the Harrier not only missed an arm and a leg. It also suffered severe explosive trauma evidenced by the cratering frontal armor.

"This is going to be a little tricky."

Ves did not bother with a plasma cutter. Who needed those heavy tools when he already had possessed a much more potent weapon?

He retrieved his Amastendira and dialed the power setting to a medium-intensity burn. He aimed the barrel of the pistol at the damaged chest armor and pulled the trigger.

The laser slowly melted through the Harrier's uncompressed armor plating. Even though the uncompressed armor lacked any notable attributes, the mech technicians still called out in alarm.

"How powerful is that gun?"

"Is this a new type of laser cutter? Where can I buy one?"

"You idiot. It's not a tool, but a weapon! Do you think any compact laser pistol can outperform a plasma cutter?"

"Ouch! You didn't have to hit my head!"

Once Ves carefully burned through the frontal plating, he called over a couple of aging bots to remove the excess debris. Once the bots peeled away the last layers, Ves came face-to-face with Dietrich's limp body.

"Hang on there, Dietrich! Help is coming."

A pair of homegrown medics climbed on top of the prone Harrier and carefully crawled over to the cockpit. "He's suffered more than a concussion! We need to take him to the medbay!"

The medics efficiently removed the unconscious Dietrich from the piloting seat and laid him down on a floating stretcher. In less than two minutes, they secured the Little Boss and guided his stretcher towards the medbay.

Chapter 328 Loop

In a battle between forces comprised of over one division, the worth of a single mech had been reduced to almost nothing.

Mechs continued to fall and ships sustained more and more damage. The willingness to fight on and inflict more casualties to the opponents continued to burn unabated.

From the initial explosive start, the battle had turned into a lower-intensity battle of attrition. The two fleets widened the distance between each other and started rotating their spent mechs in and out of their carriers in order to replenish or perform some emergency repairs.

Even though the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion worked their mechs and mech pilots to the bone, they only had each other in their sights. No matter how much they suffered, as long as their enemies suffered with them, their willingness to get back in space remained steady.

The momentous battle had a profound effect on Ves, especially when Dietrich returned with wounds.

"Will he make a recovery?"

"He's still in one piece." Someone said. "That's good, right? When a cockpit is breached, the pilot is always dead. Dietrich only got away with a couple of hard bumps so he should be back on his feet in no time."

Ves truly hoped his friend would recover. The Whalers had suffered enough on the Glowing Planet and losing another ship from the Vesian sneak attack put them in a very somber mood.

He left the hangar bay and returned to engineering before stepping up to the command console again. Once he activated the plot of the local space, he noted that the two fleets still hadn't shown any signs of retreating.

From his observations of this battle, he made two conclusions.

First, the mercenary corps and gangs stood no chance against a military force. While the mechs of the Mech Legion didn't always trump over the mechs of the private sector, the level of training, discipline and coordination became a huge force multiplier that mowed down any undisciplined group of mechs.

"No wonder Dietrich hadn't made it. As far as the Mech Legion is concerned, he's a lone wolf with nobody else to back him up."

Second, the battle also showcased that the best mechs didn't always prevail. Some of the bigger outfits like the Blood Claws fielded advanced mechs piloted by their best champions. These mechs cost about the same as the Bloodbeak and featured compressed armor and a robust flight system.

They should have stolen the show when they faced a squad of cheaper Vesian mechs, but in actuality the opposite happened. The Mech Legion had no scruples in ganging up on these elites with an abundance of frontline space mechs.

These frontline space mechs utilized designs that barely looked like mechs. They resembled spacecraft with arms, as their legs had been made redundant entirely. Instead, the designers extended the waist and stuffed some extra thrusters to enhance their forward acceleration.

Ves estimated that frontline space mechs like these shouldn't cost more than 15 million credits. On the plot, eight of them managed to isolate an advanced mech from its escorts. They pelted the unfortunate mech from all sides and quickly overwhelmed its defenses, shooting it into pieces.

The unlucky mech pilot managed to eject in time, but the Mech Legion didn't let it off and sent out a single frontline space mech to tear it to shreds.

"Numbers and skill matter more than quality in a large scale battle like this. The value of an advanced is marginal in these circumstances."

At best, a comech with compressed armor lasted a little longer in battle. If they pilot didn't possess the skill to back up his daring, even a comech wouldn't be able to save his life.

Ves understood now why the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion utilized frontline mechs and employed regular mech pilots with no prospect of advancing into a higher tier.

He also understood why the military let go of the advanced mech pilots who possessed some talent.

"It's better to form a large, cohesive force than a smaller number of unruly elites."

The entire battle lit up a light inside his mind. His conception of mechs and their use on the battlefield evolved to take into account a new kind of situation. Even though Ves had read the theory on the use of mechs in massive battlefields, he almost entirely forgot about it. Only when he truly came in touch with mass death and slaughter did he admit that he'd been wrong.

He kind of understood the System's insistence on proliferating his designs. A top mech designer should not only aim to design the most exquisite mechs for the most elite pilots, but they should also be able to design affordable mechs for the common mech pilots.

Witnessing hours-long struggle fanned his desire to design a cheaper mech. The quality and performance between the different bottom-tier designs varied wildly.

Ves had already seen the worst in the mechs of the Whalers. The designs utilized by the Mech Corps and Mech Legion possessed a lot more refinement without letting the cost get out of control.

Seeing them in action taught Ves a lot about how the mech pilots squeezed every bit of potential out of their modest mechs. From moving in unison to focusing their fire, the importance of teamwork could not be overstated.

He also understood why mech pilots enjoyed much more prestige than the mech designers who made their machines.

"The differences between mechs don't matter that much compared to the training of the mech pilots who use them.

Just when Ves thought this battle would continue until the losses grew to an unsustainable level, a sudden accident on the battlefield changed the entire equation.

The Mech Legion occasionally launched a volley of torpedoes at the ships of the Mech Corps. Most of the time, the Volari Starhawks and the other regiments of the Mech Corps whittled them down before they impacted a ship, but the extended engagement had reduced their number to half.

In those circumstances, the Mech Corps still expected to be able to shoot down the torpedo volleys.

Yet the Mech Legion didn't send out a regular volley this time. They held back beforehand to lull the Mech Corps in a sense of complacency.

Their next volley carried fifty percent more torpedoes this time.

The moment the Vesians launched their latest volley, the Mech Corps knew they'd fallen into a trap.

Many mechs of the Volari Starhawks tried to disentangle from their dance with the Grand Chasers, but failed to break away. The Grand Chasers knew that this was their coup-de-grace and did all they could to bind the Starhawks in place.

The other regiments that hovered close to the fleet went in action to take out the torpedoes. While they felled a fair number of explosive payloads, it was never enough as the surviving torpedoes filtered through the dense rain of fire.

Even though a handful of ranged mechs hastily emerged from the carriers to help out their comrades, a couple of torpedoes still made it through in the end.

Four ships suffered severe damage. One torpedo missed its mark due to being subjected by an intense amount of ECM.

However, its programming forced it to continue on with its terminal flight and just happen to strike a nearby ship.

The damaged ship just happened to be a transport carrying a large-scale dimensional smoother.

The moment the ship blew up, a strange pulse of spacetime wracked the impact site. The immediate area around the wreckage deformed in some way. The mechs nearest to the damaged site splintered apart into tiny hand-sized pieces as if their mechs ran through an indestructible net.

The disaster spooked the Mech Corps, and the brass quickly issued a call for a general retreat.

The massive fleet comprised of the ships from the Bright Republic finally moved away from their Vesian counterparts.

The Volari Starhawks pulled back as well. Though some of the Grand Chasers showed signs of moving in pursuit, they received orders to pull back as well.

As the distance quickly widened, the mechs stopped shooting each other as their shots increasingly missed the mark.

"Why did they retreat all of a sudden?"

He understood why the Mech Corps retreated in the face of such a disaster. Without the dimensional smoother keeping the local spacetime stable, they risked getting felled by another anomaly. They had to rearrange their formation as quickly as possible and that took time.

The Mech Legion should have pushed their advantage and exploit the opening revealed by the Mech Corps.

Then, he looked at the live feed of the area in space where the dimensional smoother had been torn apart. Debris thrown away from the explosion halted their outward expansion and started to reverse.

The site of the explosion thrummed and vibrated as if a singularity came into being.

Instead, something more miraculous happened. Time seemed to reverse as the broken parts converged into one. A blast reappeared, but this time it started outwards and compressed inward like an implosion. The debris lost their deformations and slotted back into a single whole transport as if it had never been destroyed in the first place.

The torpedo that struck it got restored as well, but it traveled away from the previously-doomed ship as if time continued to rewind.

"What?!"

Ves scratched his head. Had the ship really been restored to whole, just like that?

Then the torpedo slowed down mid-flight, before travelling forward as if time had been flipped in the right direction again. The torpedo juked back and forth as if it dodged a storm of counterfire and made a drastic turn as it got affected by ECM before impacting the transport yet again.

The exact same explosion happened and the ship got destroyed in the exact same way. Besides having been left behind by the fleet, nothing appeared to have changed.

Moments later, time reversed yet again, and the debris pulled back together until the ship came back to life. The torpedo that felled travelled outwards again as if it had just been launched.

A spike of fear ran through his spine as Ves continued to watch the same event happening over and over again. Of all the things he expected when a dimensional smoother got destroyed, he never realized it could actually lead to a strange loop in time.

"What the hell is a dimensional smoother made of?"

Ves had the conception that humanity had been playing with fire when they came up with such a device. Although its ability to force space and time to remain stable proved useful, the dangers resulting from improper use scared the living light out of his soul.

When Ves thought about the attempts to overload the dimensional smoothers aboard the Gregarious Wrath, he broke out a nervous sweat.

No wonder the Mech Corps pulled out so quickly. Even the Mech Legion wanted nothing to do with the anomaly despite already passing it by. Their excessive caution indicated that the anomaly might expand and engulf others into this seemingly endless time loop.

"At least they stopped fighting."

The battle might have made sense to the higher ups, but Ves always worried about getting the Happy Jelly shot out from underneath him. As a former transport vessel, it lacked the toughness and structural integrity of a purpose-built combat carrier. Even a single mech acting out alone would be able to cripple the Jelly.

The two fleets continued to drift apart, going in slightly different directions as they made their way out of the Glowing Zone.

One remarkable thing happened as they made their final leg of the journey. Rescue parties from both sides flew back and descended on the debris field to pull out any survivors that had been left behind. A handful of transports also grabbed some of the smaller intact containers and brought them back to their fleets.

Ves found it remarkable that the rescue parties went out of their way to avoid each other. Not a single mech or shuttle clashed against each other.

It seemed that even if the Republic and the Kingdom hated each other's guts, they still possessed some sense of humanity.

"This should be the end of this campaign."

After seventy days of traveling, fighting, and making a profit, the survivors would finally return home with their booty.

Chapter 329 Booty

Ves half-expected some kind of surprise to spring in front of his face. Maybe a fleet of pirates would transition out of FTL nearby, or maybe the Vesians wanted to go for a second round.

Only until the entire fleet flew beyond the edge of the Glowing Zone and transitioned into FTL did he relax.

"It's really over now."

The motley Republican fleet had split up into smaller detachments that each flew in a different direction.

Most of the ships of the Mech Corps navigated towards Bentheim, including all of their transports that had been stuffed with high-value ores.

The Happy Jelly received the same navigational data and jumped with the diminished fleet along with many of the other outfits that chose to join in. Right now, none of them looked to be in a shape to fight.

Everyone was bone-tired and they used up too much of their mechs and supplies to defend their own valuable cargo.

After half a day of travel, Ves finally left the engineering bay and sought out Walter. He found him on the bridge, wearing a pensive face.

"Hi, Walter."

"Larkinson. What are you here for?"

"I wanted to ask how we are dealing with the cargo. We made it out with a lot of exotics."

Before they went on this expedition, Ves had negotiated a ten percent cut on the earnings. Naturally, as he offered his services as an individual, the money would flow in his personal accounts instead of his company accounts.

Walter nodded in response. "I just got off the line with the Mech Corps. They want me to sell my haul to them once we reach Bentheim."

"What kind of prices are they offering?"

"I had someone check the market prices. They're lower than the official prices and the black market prices. We'll be forced to sell the goods at a thirty percent discount if we take this deal."

Ves frowned at that. "That sounds scummy. What are they offering in return?"

"Nothing. Well, there's one thing. We can get rid of our hot potatoes. Don't forget that everyone already knows we've made it off with billions of credits worth of exotics. What do you think will happen if we want to wait for a better price and store it in some kind of warehouse in Bentheim or Cloudy Curtain? A whole bunch of untraceable mechs will descend on it and steal all our hard-earned valuables away!"

Too much wealth wasn't always a good thing if you didn't have the strength to protect your assets. With how prolific the campaign had been, a large number of vultures must have already gathered in and around Bentheim.

Any outfit that showed any carelessness would instantly be robbed of their possessions.

Walter's Whalers had never been anything more than a gang that ruled over a single rural planet. They lost a large portion of their men and mechs so their strength was at an all-time low just when they made it off with an enormous harvest.

Such a combination easily bred disaster.

"Isn't there any other party who will offer a better price for our goods?"

"They all shut me down when I called." Walter admitted with furrowed brows.

"Even the black market is refusing to listen to my offers."

There was only one reason why no one else dared to engage in the trade. They'd been warned off by the Mech Corps.

Ves understood what went on as he listened to Walter. "The exotics we've harvested from the Glowing Planet are strategic materials. Even if the Mech Corps won't incorporate them into their own mechs, they can still make a handsome profit by selling them to the Friday Coalition or some cross-star sector trading company."

"The Mech Corps doesn't want us to sell our exotics to the Vesians or the pirates. It will strengthen their enemies even further if we trade with someone outside of the Republic."

They really had no choice but to accept the unfair conditions proposed by the Mech Corps. Ves actually admired them for pulling off this stunt. They extorted them out of their exotics, but at least they didn't offer too much of a discount.

As Walter put it, "Thirty percent is not worth falling out with the Mech Corps."

The Mech Corps offered different rates on different types and qualities of exotics. While it had been easy for the Whalers to tally the amount and variety of exotics, it was a lot more difficult to judge their quality. They'd need a professional to nail down their exact value.

Even if Ves knew a thing or two about exotics, he wouldn't claim to be a specialist in raw exotic ores.

Due to the differences in quality, Ves and Walter found it hard to estimate a final price on their harvest.

"Depending on how much higher grade stuff is mixed in with the junk exotics, we can earn around seventeen to thirty-five billion credits."

This was a massive profit, and it could have been more if the Whalers hadn't lost a ship. The Whalers instantly turned into billionaires while Ves could look forward to a decent payday as well, not that he needed it. He already received the most important rewards from the System.

Still, the euphoria of earning all of those credits quickly made way for skepticism. "Your gang is one of the smaller outfits that profited from the Glowing Planet. The Blood Claws must have earned at least ten times as much, and the Mech Corps themselves at least a thousand times this sum."

"What's your point?" Walter scratched his greying head.

"A lot of people and a lot of organizations are getting rich overnight. They also happened to have lost a lot of mechs and men. As you just mentioned, getting into possession of a lot of wealth but not enough means to defend it all will only invite calamity. The first thing everyone will do is spend all of their money on strengthening their forces."

Now he understood the point that Ves was trying to make. "Everyone will jack up their prices. Hah! That's bad for us, but good for you!"

Now that they were on their way back to civilized space, Ves began to think like a businessman again. He knew that the aftermath of the campaign would have profound effects on the local economy.

As he left the bridge to return to his bunk, Ves thought about who ultimately gained an advantage of the brief campaign.

The biggest winners should be MTA who lent the dimensional smoothers to the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion. Ves suspected that the price of these things shouldn't be small.

As the Glowing Planet became known when it drifted through the Republic's territory, the Mech Corps was able to mobilize more forces and more allies. In turn, this meant they made more profit than their Vesian counterparts.

"Losing a dimensional smoother should hurt a lot."

Even if the Mech Legion was at fault for destroying the loaned device, the ultimate responsibility lay with the Republic who lent it in the first place. The MTA would demand a lot of compensation for their lost machine.

"No wonder they're so overbearing this time. They want to make up for their losses."

Still, all these things happened in the background. Despite the pain, the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion would definitely begin to invest their earnings into improving their battle capabilities.

The other gangs and mercenary corps would follow suit as well. What was the use of a padded bank account when then they only returned with half their mechs and ships?

Still, Ves predicted that a lot of people would retire in the coming months. Why would these mercenaries and gang members continue to fight like beggars when they already received enough money to retire like kings?

He expected many of them to apply for citizenship at the Friday Coalition. Some of the partners of the Coalition like the Carnegie Group and the Vermeer Group welcomed immigration from the poorer states as long as they brought enough benefits.

"That's going to be bad." Ves thought grimly as he walked down the corridors of the Happy Jelly. "Fewer mercenaries means less customers."

Still, he didn't think that a lot of people would succeed in applying to the Coalition. All of that money had to be split up in the group. The larger the organisation, the more they earned, but the more they had to split up their booty as well. Only the upper ranks should earn enough to retire in the Coalition.

Thinking about the ripple effects of all of this major influx in spending gave Ves a headache. Besides predicting a rise in inflation and a couple of other consequences, he didn't dare to make any further assumptions.

"That reminds me, the LMC should have setup a robust financial department by now." His CFO Mackarie should have already analyzed the upcoming shifts in the economy. "Now that there's no restriction to using the galactic net, I should check up on how my company is faring."

Ves vaguely thought that his company should be making a brisk amount of sales. Even though he hadn't kept tabs on every Blackbeak that had been deployed on the Glowing Planet, if he took Fadah's Blackbeak as a measure, then the model line should have performed well.

Even as the cheap and rickety mechs of the Whalers started to fall apart from all of the stress and fatigue, the Blackbeak still performed close to its prime. This should be a given, as Ves had explicitly designed the Blackbeak to excel in long, gruelling wars.

Once he returned to his bunk, he checked up on Lucky's egg before jumping into his bed. He brought up his comm and searched the latest news on the LMC.

"LIVING MECH COMPANY RISING LIKE A ROCKET - REVENUE IS ESTIMATED TO SURPASS 4 BILLION CREDITS"

"IN BED WITH THE LMC - VAUN INDUSTRIAL SIGNS LICENSING CONTRACT TO PRODUCE THE INCREASINGLY PROMINENT BLACKBEAK DESIGN"

"WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? LET THIS MECH EXPERT TELL YOU THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE BRONZE, SILVER AND GOLD LABEL MECHS OF THE LMC"

"WHAT A STEAL! PREVIOUS OWNER OF A LIMITED EDITION MARCUS AURELIUS MECH DESIGNED BY VES LARKINSON SOLD FOR 250 MILLION CREDITS!"

In between the trivial bits of news, Ves came across an alarming piece of news.

"They signed an agreement with Vaun Industrial!"

When the topic came up in the previous board meeting, Ves firmly rejected the option to allow Vaun to produce his bronze label Blackbeaks.

The LMC eventually partnered up with Mr. Neverland's Elemental Mech Engineering instead. Although their first copies of the Blackbeak suffered from a couple of faults, they eventually straightened out their production and produced mechs worthy of his name, if only barely.

"At least the EME puts some heart in their products."

What he saw at Vaun Industrial's massive manufacturing complex didn't disgust him, but they came close in doing so. Vaun pursued the limits in scale, precision and efficiency, and did everything in its power to eliminate the human factor out of their high-volume fabrication processes.

"That's not to say it's the wrong approach, but it doesn't fit with my design philosophy."

Even if he designed a couple of cheaper frontline mechs, he would still try to fabricate them according to his preferred methods. Ves wanted the LMC to be known as a company that sold mechs that came to life. Producing lifeless lumps of alloys directly contradicted the vision he laid out for his company.

"What should I do about this?"

He knew that such a decision must have been approved by an overwhelming majority of the board. His grandfather Benjamin alone should have been able to stop this decision in its tracks.

Since the company went through with it anyway indicated that the Larkinson Estate at least tacitly assented to the move.

"They don't understand my intentions."

It might have been his fault for not conveying his vision properly. The Larkinsons had never really been short on money, but they probably started seeing the benefits once they realized they could milk their twenty-five percent shares in his company.

He didn't blame them for being greedy.

"I'm going to have to set some rules when I return."

Chapter 330 Profits

When Ves delved into the galactic net and called up a limited summary of the LMC's earnings, he became surprised how much it had earned since he left for the Glowing Planet.

The LMC itself made a good chunk of profit by selling over thirty silver label Blackbeaks at elevated prices. The profit margin went up over time as Marcella likely took advantage of the increased demand of the silver label model.

Right now, the company made around 30 million credits per mech in gross profits! To put that into perspective, if Ves extrapolated this performance to an entire year, the company could easily rake in over 5 billion credits in profits with its own production alone!

"It's too bad we aren't producing the Blackbeaks fast enough." Ves shook his head.

Even if the LMC possessed a fantastic production line, it could only do so much. Fabricating one comech like the Blackbeak was the best that the LMC could achieve.

"I should consider adding another production line in the near future. This bottleneck is really starting to annoy me."

He also wanted to reduce his reliance on third-party manufacturers, though he guessed he'd never be able to get rid of them. The more his designs caught on, the more people wanted to buy his products.

Many other manufacturers possessed a head-start compared to the LMC in investing in their production capacity. In the short and medium term, it made more sense to license his designs to third parties.

However, Ves believed that ultimately the LMC would catch up when it reinvested its profits into adding new production lines.

"The profits I'm earning from the licensing deals will help a lot."

Compared to the insane profit margins of the silver label Blackbeaks, the bronze label versions obviously earned the LMC a trickle of money.

Elemental Mech Engineering sold just over a hundred mechs each month and paid the LMC 2.5 million credits per sale.

In a business perspective, the EME profited big at the expense of the LMC, as the third-party only had to handover a flat fee per mech while being able to jack up its prices to take advantage of the increased demand for the entire product line.

Ves, Marcella and his company had done the heavy lifting to promote the Blackbeak design. He risked his reputation and Melinda's life by accepting a public design duel against Michael Dumont.

Still, as much as Ves could harp on EME's freeloading, the company at least produced decent mechs. The reviews and comments on their products had generally been positive, and nobody complained about the minor imperfections they still hadn't been able to eliminate.

The LMC would be set to earn about 3 billion credits per year in licensing fees from the EME. This was a very tidy income stream considering that Ves and his company didn't need to lift a finger to earn this sum.

If the EME already made a modest contribution to his company's earnings, then the newer income stream from Vaun really ratcheted it up.

Vaun Industrial had hit the ground running as soon as they signed the licensing contract about a month ago. They allocated a significant amount of production lines to the first batches of Blackbeaks.

Impressively enough, almost none of the copies featured any faults or imperfections. This enabled them to sell their bronze label Blackbeaks at a slightly higher price than EME.

More remarkable was that Vaun Industrial skipped the local markets entirely. Instead of selling their mechs in Bentheim alongside the offerings of the LMC and the EME, Vaun had made the bold decision to export it across the Republic's borders.

Vaun had actually managed to sell the Blackbeak in the Ylvain Protectorate of all places!

"I thought those religious nutjobs always turned up their noses against foreign mechs."

Bordering on the far side of the Bright Republic's borders, the Ylvain Protectorate was a rather peculiar third-rate state. Similar to the Hexarchic Hegemony, the government instituted a strong religious regime, practically brainwashing its citizens from birth.

The Ylvainans grew up to be a closed and xenophobic bunch. This happened to make their state a favored recruiting ground for the CFA, who constantly needed new blood to crew their warships.

Compared to their passion for warships, the Ylvainans were less impressed with mechs. Even though they understood their necessity and oriented a significant part of their society to mechs, they only maintained a robust defence force and had never shown any signs of aggression.

This pretty much made them one of the best neighbors of the Bright Republic. The Ylvainans would never ally themselves with the Vesians and attack the Republic from two fronts.

"Vaun isn't satisfied with exporting the Blackbeaks to the Ylvainans alone. They're also starting to break grounds in other foreign markets."

Ves didn't know what to think about their ambitious actions. They basically pre-empted the LMC by expanding into the foreign markets first. Would the LMC still have room left to sell their own products once they finally got around to exporting their own products across the border?

The conflicts of interests that resulted in such a clash might upend their entire relationship. On the other hand, Vaun also did the heavy lifting in creating a demand for the product line outside the Republic.

"It feels weird for my company to be the freeloader this time."

In any case, the relatively high volume of production already netted the LMC a lot of money. Regardless if the mechs sold or not, Vaun had to pay the licensing fees upon producing a model.

This already netted the LMC around 700 million credits. Vaun already showed signs of ramping up their production even further, but even if it maintained the same level of production, they still had to pay over 8 billion credits to his company on an annual basis!

Compared to what Ves earned from his contributions on the Glowing Planet, the LMC generated at least five times as much money!

"They didn't even need to risk their lives." He muttered.

This was such a drastic rise in profits especially since the LMC didn't incur that much expenses. The LMC would have earned a multitude more money if it didn't have to rely on third-party manufacturers to compensate for its inadequate production capacity.

Considering the ridiculous amount of licensing fees that Vaun Industrial transferred to the LMC, Ves found it hard to stay angry at the board.

While it didn't appear that Ves was short on money, he knew that things might change once the war started in earnest. In addition, he also needed to accumulate a lot of money to take part in the introduction of the next generation of mechs less than nine years from now.

The first licenses always cost the most. Even a warchest of 100 billion credits wouldn't be sufficient to get ahold of a single nextgen component license.

License costs usually halved after a year or two, but by then the initial investors had gained a decisive first mover advantage in the rebooted mech market. Once these investors gained a lead, it was hard to knock them down from their pedestals.

Still, thanks to his earnings, the LMC was well on track to take part in the coming race.

"All of this is thanks to my Blackbeak design."

Without his skills and his expensive and exclusive component licences, he'd never be able to design a mech that could stand on its own in the mech industry. Both of these factors comprised the core ingredients to the success of his design.

He didn't grow too conceited at his design's amazing performance. It had taken a lot of work to gather all the ingredients. Without risking his life on Groening IV, Ves would have likely continued to piddle in the mud with the increasingly aging Marc Antony Mark II design.

Only by stepping out of his comfort zone and do the jobs that others were afraid of doing did he elevate himself above his peers.

"I kind of understand Master Olson's perspective now."

He always understood that going on expeditions increased a mech designer's perspective and polished their skills.

Yet enriching his perspective only formed half of the benefits.

The other half consisted of material rewards. The harvest made on the expedition along with the rewards given by others for completing a mission played a crucial role in accelerating his career.

Right now, besides padding his personal bank account with a couple of extra billion credits, Ves also fulfilled a mission from the Clifford Society. He already sent the logs of the Whalers to one of their addresses.

Once the Society confirmed their authenticity, Ves would be credited with another 200 merits. He could do a lot with such a generous amount of merits, from acquiring exclusive Coalition licenses to buying premium production equipment.

He also earned big from the System. While the golden lottery tickets were a bit iffy, he did gain the amazing Amastendiria laser pistol from the random draw.

That weapon alone was worth more than the annual profit of a major mech manufacturer. Although the System hadn't managed to recover it to its prime

state, its ridiculous power and capacity meant that Ves feared no threat on foot.

The Transcendence Pill also formed a unique reward. Ordinarily, he should have only been able to get his hands on such a pill much later on when he became a Journeyman Mech Designer. To be able to upgrade his mental parameters beyond the human limit so early would definitely help him advance much faster.

As for the mysterious Special Upgrade Voucher (Machine), Ves browsed his Inventory and scanned its description again.

[Special Upgrade Voucher (Machine)]

This voucher can be applied to any object that fits the definition 'machine' and will comprehensively upgrade them to a higher rank. The smaller the machine, the more extensive the upgrade. This voucher is less effective on advanced and complex machines.

From what Ves understood of the brief description, he could apply the voucher to anything from his Amastendira to the Barracuda. It just wouldn't be very effective if he used the voucher on those two machines.

"The Amastendira is so advanced the System categorizes it with the rank of Supreme. I've never seen a Supreme-ranked item before in my life. Even the old Lucky is only rated gold by the System."

As for the Barracuda, she consisted of several millions of tons of both regular and exotic alloys. Perhaps the entire energy of the voucher would only be able to improve its acceleration by one percent or something.

In conclusion, the voucher failed to match his expectations. "As expected of the System."

From the golden lottery tickets to the limited capabilities of the upgrade voucher, the System really pulled the wool over its eyes. It surely profited big when it absorbed the strange diamond-like jewel that Ves had recovered from the skull of that long-dead giant.

"What's up with the giant, anyway?"

The entire Glowing Planet had been weird from the start. From destroying ships with spacetime anomalies, to messing up the energy cells with the overcharge phenomenon, everything about the planet pointed to a sense that it didn't welcome any visitors.

Its temper tantrum upon stealing the jewel only reinforced that idea.

All of these happenings prompted Ves to ask a very absurd question. "Is the planet... alive?"

Ves didn't dare to guess the answer. He had only scratched the surface of the Glowing Planet's origins and didn't wish to make a faulty assumption.

At least he left all of its horrors behind. Of all the awful things that happened to him, meeting the ghost that wore his mother's face was the worst. He never really made up his mind about his mother.

Malicious or not, the dead should have moved on from this reality, or at least stay out of sight of their descendants.

"I'm glad I won't have to see her again."

The Happy Jelly travelled several light-years away from the Glowing Planet by now. There was no way he would encounter the ghost again.

Would he?