

### Chapter 491 Encirclemen

When the artificial meteorites fell, House Eneqqin unleashed all of its hidden anti-air batteries in Neron City. This enabled the rebels to locate them and neutralize them. The same couldn't be said for the batteries erected by the rebels in secret.

Due to the need for utmost secrecy, the Detemen League only installed a limited amount of turrets in the city. Only a handful of batteries were in range of Lord Javier's flying cockpit at this time.

Laser beams hit the cockpit in an instant, but surprisingly left no mark! The orange energy field enveloping the cockpit prevented any damage from going through!

Missiles soared into the sky after the laser beams pattered out. The rebels launched them out of the few mobile missile platforms in their possession. A larger number of shoulder-launched missiles fired by infantrymen followed suit.

Each of those missiles unerringly hit the cockpit that made no attempt to hide its presence. Even if it wished to deploy any stealth or ECM, the enormous amount of heat released by its boosters and energy field overpowered any attempts at covering it up.

"What does it take to down this cockpit?!" Addy screamed in frustration over the command channel.

"Don't stop hitting it!" Ves urged the rebels. "The cockpit shouldn't possess much of a reserve. It's not as invincible as the Raphael when it was still intact!"

Regardless of his words, the rebels hated the man inside the cockpit so much that they never let up. More and more laser beams struck the energy field while missiles of varying payloads constantly tried to disturb its integrity.

It took some time, but the energy field eventually began to flicker. It had obviously reached the end of its reserves. Only a few more hits would tear apart the cockpit's protective coverage.

"Hold your fire! Don't put anymore missiles in the air!"

Missiles already in the air still slammed into the energy field, but no one launched another salvo. A handful of laser turrets continued to strike the cockpit unerringly. They chipped away at the remnants of the energy field until it finally winked out.

"The cockpit lost its protection! Take down its boosters! Be careful with it, we want him alive!"

The cockpit's exterior was made out of lightweight but highly resilient compressed alloys. This eased the burden on the laser turrets as they accurately took out the vulnerable boosters and anti-grav modules.

With less and less components keeping the cockpit aloft, it slowly plunged towards the ground in a barely-controlled crash.

"Surround the crash site! Don't leave any gaps exposed!"

Ves watched from his terminal as the rebel forces moved in position to surround the projected crash site. Some of their vehicles hurried to keep up with the plunging cockpit.

As the cockpit slammed into an abandoned street and slid forth for a short distance, Ves wondered whether this ordeal would finally be over. As much as he enjoyed being useful, he could have offered the same level of assistance in orbit.

"I'm not cut out for the battlefield."

Though he long shed his innocence, he still disliked being jerked around in places where he shouldn't even be present. "I hope after this, the Flagrant Vandals will take a lengthy vacation."

Once the rebels brought Lord Javier under custody, the Vandals should have nothing left to tie them to this star system.

"There's also their operation in Detemen II."

Though Ves thought that Detemen IV played a vastly more important role, Colonel Lowenfield opted to take charge of the detachment responsible for fulfilling their objectives on Detemen II. He found that to be a very odd decision. Why would the colonel pay so much attention to that smaller, more impoverished planet?

"The only thing of strategic value on that planet is their renewable exotics mine. Even then, it's nothing remarkable. An endless stream of junk exotics isn't anything to get crazy about."

The sad truth about third-rate states was that anything valuable got snatched away by the local hegemony. In the case of the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom, the Friday Coalition often appropriated their treasures under a variety of excuses. Though compared to the Hexadric Hegemony, the Coalition partners at least had the decency to compensate for some of their losses.

The fact that neither the Coalition or the Hegemony snatched the renewable exotics mine from Detemen II should have hammered in the point that it didn't hold too much value.

"Is it the solar foundries that they're after?"

Ves tentatively rejected that possibility. The solar foundries carried the same worth as a large-scale manufacturing complex. They stored a lot of raw and processed materials, but their value was purely economic.

From the start, he always got the sense that the Vandals omitted many details in their operation. From their planning to their objectives, all of it seemed plausible enough to fool the rank and file.

To Ves, the more he witnessed the Vandals and rebels in action, the more he questioned their motives. Assaulting an industrial star system in the middle of an enemy state was almost never done, because most people had the sense to call it crazy.

Even now, at the cusp of success, they still had a long road ahead of them. "We've certainly riled up the entire Kingdom. Let alone Imodris, every other Vesian will be out for our blood."

No matter how he looked at the picture, the risks far outweighed the possible benefits. If the Flagrant Vandals wanted to earn some cash to alleviate their massive debts, they could have invaded an industrial system closer to the border. Imodris sat well past the border regions, and neighbored several other formidable Duchies within the Kingdom.

Getting out of this cordon would test the limits of their trust in the Vesian Revolutionary Front. The Kingdom-wide movement promised to extract the Vandals after they finished their operation, but Ves found it dubious to rely on the rebels to keep their word, especially since they came from opposing states.

"Do the Vandals and the VRF have something in common?"

That was the only theory he could come up with that made some sense, yet he couldn't imagine what it looked like. Just because they shared a common

enemy didn't mean they were bosom buddies. At the very least, the Flagrant Vandals must have invested several decades into befriendng the VRF.

"Or perhaps it's the other way around."

Maybe the VRF saw the Vandals as a useful cudgel that they could point at their enemies to bludgeon their faces. They certainly did so now in an attempt to win the favor of the Detemen League.

By now, Lord Javier's cockpit came to a stop. Several rebel vehicles flew forward and landed close to the cockpit. Lightly-armored infantrymen surrounded the cockpit with their weapons bared.

One of their cadre moved forward and approached the hatch. "Step out of the cockpit, Lordling! There's nowhere else to go!"

Ten seconds passed by. The cockpit exhibited no activity at all. Its hot shell wafted steam and other matter as it slowly started to cool down.

Commander Breskin forestalled the call to surrender. "Forget about it. It's not in Javier's nature to concede on anything. Proceed with the breach."

Some of the rebel infantrymen approached the steaming cockpit and attached some sort of apparatus against the armored hatch. The device instantly started to burn. This went on for over thirty seconds.

Slowly, a rectangular man-sized hole appeared on the surface of the cockpit. A pair of soldiers grabbed onto the handholds of the apparatus and pulled the rectangular section of alloys away. Another pair of soldiers jumped inside the hole.

Seconds later, they conveyed an alarming piece of news.

"Lord Javier is absent!"

Yes and the commanding officers of the rebels patched into the sensor feed of the soldiers inside the cramped cockpit. They ignored the luxurious interior

and focused their gazes on the burning hole that ran through the floor of the cockpit and reached past the street. The hole reached all the way into the tunnel underneath the street.

"His cockpit possesses an emergency underground boring system!" Addy spoke. "He snuck away while we were waiting for him to surrender!"

"What are you waiting for?! Get after him!" Commander Breskin barked. "Keep up the cordon and extend our perimeter to the drainage system underneath the streets. While you're at it, deploy every anti-stealth measures that we have on hand! He couldn't have snuck under our noses without employing some sort of stealth system."

Everyone on the field scrambled to track down the elusive bastard. Several rebel specialists jumped down the hole inside the cockpit and activated specialized tracking devices that could magnify even the smallest traces.

"The trail is faint, but he's heading west!"

This prompted the rebels to deploy a special canister. Once thrown, the device stopped in mid-air and dispersed coarse particles in the air. These particles floated in the air for minutes at a time and looked very distinctive. Anything that passed through would immediately stir up the particles, exposing anyone trying to sneak past the affected area.

It was an extremely low-tech solution to a high-tech means of evasion. Despite the simplicity of the idea, it was very reliable when deployed in a smaller area as long as the search parties brought enough canisters.

The rebels didn't expect their target to be stupid enough to stumble into the particle fields. Instead, they formed a cordon of particles in a loose circle surrounding the cockpit crash site.

After they deployed the first wave of canisters, the rebels tightened the circle and deployed another wave of canisters. This would go on until they uncovered their target or met each other at the center.

The people on the ground also utilized other methods to track down Lord Javier. For example, the trackers in the drainage tunnel followed the faint trails that Javier's stealth system hadn't been able to hide.

"Keep an eye on the particles! He won't be able to bypass them, but he might attempt to mold his suit behind an obstacle. Double-check each surface if you have to!"

As Ves watched the rebels trying to sniff out their fleeing prey, he began to frown a bit. Most of the rebels believed that Lord Javier might have nowhere else to go, but he didn't believe that the man would be so easily caught. After witnessing so many of his tricks, Ves kept getting the feeling that they overlooked something important.

His brain churned as various ideas flitted past his mind. He tried to put himself in Javier's boots. A frightening possibility emerged in his mind. Though he lacked the proof to back his assertions, he nonetheless felt it was important enough to inform the rebels.

Ves switched into the command channel. "Commander, Addy, don't put too much stock on the trail! I would bet a billion sovies that the trail in the tunnel is a decoy!"

"So you believe he climbed back to ground level?" Addy asked with a fair amount of skepticism in her tone. "Even if he snuck back onto the streets, he won't be able to evade our particle emissions."

"The particle clouds won't do a thing to Javier because they only float up to five meters in the air! Think! Does Javier lack any means to float into the air?!"

I believe he's trying to fly away under stealth right this instant! He's laughing at us while we toil on the ground!"

"I believe you." Breskin responded. He hardly hesitated in believing this possibility. "We've borrowed much of our tracking methods from the instruction manuals of the auxiliary regiments. Lord Javier would certainly take into account that we would deploy these methods beforehand and plan ahead."

Still, even if they suspected that he was getting away in the air, they didn't possess enough canisters to cover the entire airspace in the area surrounding the downed cockpit.

They could either deploy their limited canisters in a limited volume of space above the ground, or continue their sweep on the ground. They couldn't pursue both options at the same time, not without bringing additional canisters stored back in base!

By the time they transported the extra canisters to the area, Lord Javier might have gotten away already!

#### **Chapter 492 Tenacious**

As someone who made use of a really great stealth system from the System, Ves knew all about their strengths and weaknesses. Though he had no clue how the stealth system prevented any signals from leaking out of a bubble of space and covered all of his tracks, it still wouldn't be able to deal with something as simple as a cloud of particles or other junk.

Though the particle canisters offered the rebels on the field with a ready-made solution to sniff out anyone under stealth, before the invention of canisters, humans improvised many other means.

"Wait a moment." Ves interjected. "You still have a lot of missiles left, right?"



Breskin immediately knew what he was thinking. "Slaying Lord Javier is out of the question. We can't afford to pulverize him with a blanket missile bombardment!"

That sounded really strange to Ves. Weren't they out to kill Lord Javier? What did it matter if he died on the battlefield, when they would just kill him in their custody? Ves set the matter aside and focused on persuading the commander before Javier flew away.

"You don't have to set the missiles to maximum lethality. Make them explode above the altitude that Javier is probably trying to reach and saturate the surroundings in a dome of explosions. The smoke and shockwaves will be sufficient to disturb his stealth even if he's well outside the blast zone of the payloads."

"I understand what you're saying, but it's an enormous risk."

"It frees up your particle canisters." Ves pointed out. "This way, you don't have to decide between spreading your particles at ground level or in the air. Your infantrymen can keep sweeping the streets while letting your missiles take care of whatever might be floating above."

Breskin needed to decide quickly, because with each second, Javier would slip further and further away.

"Let's do it." Addy said. "The missiles are meant to be used, and if we accidentally kill the bastard, then it's still better than letting him get away scott-free."

They ultimately bowed down to necessity. As much as they evidently wanted to keep the little bastard alive, they couldn't afford to lose in front of everyone that paid attention. Their prestige didn't allow them to fail at the cusp of victory.

The rebels moved quickly. They still possessed a decent stock of missiles, enough to blanket a wide dome around the abandoned cockpit for ten or so minutes. Ves helped tweak the programming of some of the missiles to limit their lethality and disperse their emissions.

His shallow familiarity with missile weapons left out any drastic modifications. While low-tech explosive missiles weren't very sophisticated, it still took an expert to optimize them to achieve a specific outcome.

Dedicated missile developers and mech designers specialized in missiles could do a much better job than Ves, but he made do regardless by tweaking the easiest settings. Since time was of the issue, he only spent thirty seconds at most.

"Launch them now!"

The operators in Breskin's mobile command center planned out the missile launches in the time that Ves tweaked the missiles. This didn't take a lot of time, since they instructed AIs to calculate an optimum spread of missiles above the streets. They spent more time in double-checking the results to insure the missiles didn't detonate next to one of their men or something.

"Three, two, one, launch!"

Over a hundred missiles launched in the air from various points. Most of them consisted of smaller shoulder-launched warheads. Only a small amount of vehicle-launched missiles joined the fray. While larger missiles blanketed a much larger area, their lethality encompassed a much wider zone. The AIs calculated that it was better to saturate the airspace with lots of smaller missiles than a smaller number of larger ones.

**BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!**

Deep thrums shook the ground as the explosions in the air kicked up a lot of air. The airspace above everyone's head whipped up violently as multiple shockwaves from near-simultaneous explosions overlapped with each other.

In the meantime, all sorts of sensors focused in the air. They tried to pick up any disturbance they could pick up. Inside the rebel base, processors worked to interpret any anomalies in the sensor data, dismissing most of them as artifacts or erroneous readings.

One anomaly quickly stood out. A small, indeterminate mass hovered a small distance away from the Raphael's cockpit. The moment the shockwaves from the nearest explosions blanketed the coordinates of the mass, some of the winds swept around the mass instead of going through it. Though the signs were subtle to the naked eye, it might as well be in plain sight to the cold hard electronics that made up the sensors and the processors.

"There! Throw up a smaller range of explosions around that area!"

A small number of shoulder-launched missiles flew into the air and detonated in a smaller dome around the anomalous location. This time, the explosions happened a little bit closer. The closer range and the higher concentration of missiles whipped up a lot more air than last time. This only made it more obvious that an invisible object displaced some of the winds around its form.

"It's definitely a stealthed object!"

Though they only established that they found a stealthed object, the shape and dimensions of the object looked suspiciously like a man-sized stealth suit.

The Detemen League moved quickly upon confirmation that something invisible hung in the air. A pair of armored shuttles flew from the distance and halted in mid-air in the region around the invisible object. Hatches slid open, enabling the infantrymen inside to throw out a bunch of particle canisters.

Particles spread out in a large and hazy cloud around the shuttles. Almost immediately, a very obvious deformation stood out in the even spread of particles. "Over there!"

One of the infantrymen in the shuttles stepped forward. Unlike the other men, this soldier carried a man-sized fluid projector borrowed from the local Planetary Guard. After a brief windup, a brown slurry of slime propelled from the nozzle of the projector.

Under the onslaught of the sticky slime, the stealthed shape could no longer maintain its invisible state. A skintight suit enveloped in increasing amounts of slime appeared in the air.

"UGH! Disgusting!" Lord Javier's voice sounded out from the helmet. "Ah! Help! I can't maintain altitude!"

The gunk weighed down the suit and affected the suit's antigrav modules. The man inside the suit could only be the person they had been searching for, and right now he flailed his limbs in panic as his suit slowly drifted down.

"That's enough slime!" Breskin warned the soldier with the fluid projector.

"Catch him when he lands. No wait, grab him from out of the air. We can't risk our target falling to his death."

Someone else deployed a net launcher that reeled in the slime-covered stealth suit. The soldier with the fluid projector switched settings and doused their captive with a different spray of fluids that caused the slime to dissolve and wash away.

This enabled the rebels secure the man and remove all of the holdout weapons and gadgets embedded into the suit. Still, that didn't remove the risk of any other tricks, so the soldiers unceremoniously tore off the stealth suit and the helmet away from their captive.

"My clothes!"

Once they pulled off the helmet from the man, the familiar face of the man who once ruled Detemen IV scowled at the rebels in the shuttle. "Do you know who I am?! You're dead! You're all dead!"

One of the rebels smacked his gauntlet against Javier's face. "Shut up!"

They possessed enough training to focus on their duties. They ignored the squealing noble and frisked his naked body with utmost seriousness. Lord Javier proved his craftiness many times.

The scanners running over his body beeped in alarm as they detected several anomalous objects. The men didn't hesitate when they cut Javier's arm to extract a tiny device embedded into the muscles. Once they pulled out the object, a medic sprayed the cut with a solution that rapidly healed it up.

The soldiers repeated this routine several times, only stopping when they found they couldn't easily extract the foreign materials that had been buried deep within Javier's body.

"Bring him back to base." Breskin said with an exhausted tone. "Our doctors will pull out all the rest. After that, we can commence with the interrogation."

"Let me go!" Javier screamed over the pain of having his skin cut and healed. "My father will hound you until the ends of the galaxy for this, and he's not the only one who has an eye out on me! If you know who you just pissed off, you'll be pissing your pants!"

"Shut him up. We don't need him conscious."

One of the soldiers injected Javier with a knockout solution that instantly sent him to sleep. The quiet brought some tranquility back to the shuttle.

Ves leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. After so many risks, they finally managed to get their hands on Javier. He almost didn't believe that it

was finally over. From what the lordling demonstrated so far, Ves was sure that Javier would pull another rabbit out of his hat.

"Evidently, there is only so many rabbits he can pull out at any time."

As he waited for Javier to be brought back to base, Ves reflected on Javier's struggles. The depth of his preparation exceeded anything that Ves could imagine. From falling back to his hidden base underneath the recycling plant to sneaking off in a stealth suit, Lord Javier had demonstrated an extreme capacity for survival.

If not for the critical clues that Ves deduced in time, Lord Javier would have slipped through everyone's grasp.

Witnessing the entire chase made Ves feel a little inadequate. While he could have emulated most of the noble's methods with his old comm, his current service with the Vandals forced him to do away with most of his survival tools. Compared to the gadget-laden Javier, Ves felt very barren.

"I have to be more tenacious."

Once the Flagrant Vandals retreated from this star system, Ves planned to remedy this shortcoming. Of course, that entailed asking for special dispensation from the Vandals to carry more special equipment, but with his substantial contributions in this operation, Ves hoped that his superiors would be lenient.

"I deserve a bonus for all the work that I've done."

Without Ves, Captain Orfan wouldn't have been able to field the mechs of the Dastardly Handsome Bastards. Without Ves, the rebels wouldn't have been able to track down Javier's location. Without Ves, Javier would have gotten away by flying leisurely in the air under stealth.

And that only encompassed his greatest contributions. Ves didn't know what kind of merit system the Vandals used, but Ves felt that he would have been eligible for promotion for everything he did.

"Too bad mech designers don't fall into their organizational system."

In the end, if Ves wanted any rewards, he had to knock on Professor Velten's door. The notoriously stodgy old lady was a stickler for rules, and Ves wasn't sure if any of his achievements gained him any rewards.

"I can't wait to get back, though. I'm more than done with this crappy planet."

Everyone felt relieved with the hunt at an end. Once the rebels took custody of Lord Javier, the remaining forces of House Eneqqin in the vicinity broke apart and tried to flee the city.

The Vandal mechs that delayed them from reinforcing Lord Javier let them go without a fight. In any case, they completed all of their objectives. They never intended to crush every enemy mech.

Of course, the rebels also spread the news of the successful capture through their propaganda networks. News of what had happened spread through both sides of the conflict in an instant with the help of the galactic net.

Both the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom reacted with astonishment!

#### Chapter 493 Questions

Some of the shipwrecked Vandals stranded in the rebel base requested to be sent back to their comrades. Now that their forces took out most of the anti-air turrets controlled by the household troops, it was a lot safer to fly some transports in the air.

Certainly, many enemy mechs and turrets remained intact, but their owners lacked the guts to fire upon Vandal or rebel assets. Everyone who survived up to now tried their best to bury their heads in the sand while their enemies run amuck in the city.

"Are you sure you don't want to leave with our batch?" Lieutenant Burke asked Ves. "Our job is done here."

Ves shook his head. "I'll follow you out in the next transport. I want to be there while the rebels interrogate Lord Javier. I've managed to convince the commander that my presence would be useful if Javier spills out anything related to mechs."

His help was integral in catching the the little lordling. Ves built up a substantial amount of goodwill with the Detemen League. When he asked to be present at Lord Javier's interrogation, the rebels easily accepted his lame excuse. To them, Ves was pretty much one of them. This was an amazing concession of them because they refused the presence of every other Vandal aside from Captain Orfan.

When the lightly-wounded captain entered the base, Ves became affected by certain emotions. He was very clear that Captain Orfan didn't give a damn about him. The captain barely nodded at him before she resumed her discussion with Addy.

Ves didn't need her to like him, but he at least wanted her acknowledgement.

"Well, I don't need her to recognize me anyway."

It was in the nature of mech pilots to forget the existences of norms, those who fell under the vast majority of people who would never be able to pilot a mech. Some potentates possessed stronger biases than others.

The most extreme cases called for a drastic rearrangement of human society in the model of Ancient Sparta. In their delusional imagination, only mech pilots deserved to be free. As the only citizens of the state, they possessed all the rights in exchange for shouldering the obligation of piloting mechs.

As for everyone else, they would be destined to carry the label of slaves. Anyone without the potential to pilot mechs was expendable. Even the most



renowned mech designers that enabled the mech pilots to exert their skills enjoyed no extra rights. In the perspective of the ruling class, mech designers were slaves as well, only with a bit more value.

The crazy thing about this imagined utopia was that a number of human states tried to implement such a society.

Every attempt ended in ruin. In truth, depressing the potential of over ninety-six percent of the population caused these extremist states to stagnate. Slaves without any sense of belonging never worked to better their masters as much as a free man.

Numerous examples throughout the Age of Mechs illustrated that humanity needed to work for every human, not a tiny subject with a mutant brain.

Sadly, it appeared that Captain Orfan didn't get the message. She barely treated Addy with respect, something the observant rebel woman noted fairly quickly. Regardless, Addy flexed her diplomacy and managed to convince the mech captain to rest somewhere in piece. Once she got rid of Orfan, she strayed over to Ves.

"I never really did thank you for your help. You've really saved us, Mr. Larkinson."

Ves smiled at that. "Any other mech designer could have done the same."

"Yet you're the only one who's here."

That soured his mood a little. "Have you ever found my colleague Alloc?"

He tried to look up the Journeyman Mech Designer's whereabouts. As his mentor within the Vandal design department, Ves appreciated Alloc's insightful lessons. The lack of news regarding his status concerned Ves a lot.

Through the rebel base's communication channels, Ves contacted the Flagrant Vandal fleet in orbit several times. Each time, they told him that they

hadn't picked up Alloc's crash ball in space. Since Alloc sat next to Ves in the command center of the Stubby Growler, there was a high possibility that Alloc's crash ball followed the same trajectory as the one that held Ves.

"Maybe he landed somewhere else over the planet."

Not everyone who crash-landed onto the surface of Detemen IV chose to converge at Neron City. Those with timid hearts chose to land somewhere desolate, and await for pickup from a Vandal shuttle. It was a much safer option than landing in the vicinity of the most important city on the planet.

"He's here!"

A familiar armored shuttle entered the vehicle bay of the underground base. As soon as it touched down, a full squad of armed infantrymen hauled the unconscious form of Lord Javier.

In a minor gesture of decency, they clothed his previously-naked form with generic grey clothes. Nonetheless, the drab fabric only accentuated his fall from grace. His matte blond hair was normally styled in exquisite fashion in public. Now, they looked tousled and sweaty beyond recognition.

A number of rebels that hadn't shipped out yet goggled at Lord Javier's beaten form. They hardly believed that they actually managed to capture such a powerful figure. Though they worked together with Flagrant Vandals to accomplish this feat, it was still an exceedingly rare achievement for a local rebel movement.

Every commoner of the Kingdom learned early on that the dignity of a noble should not be sullied. Profane acts such as questioning their sexuality might even prompt a Vesian judge to sentence them to death!

Thus, witnessing the powerful Lord Javier being dragged to the medical bay like a dog was a very transformational moment for the rebels. Everyone

present made up the cadre of their organization, so they all believed in the cause with the depths of their hearts.

They just never imagined that they could pull down a noble from his pedestal in their lifetimes.

"He's really here. I still can't believe it."

"We did it... we did it!"

"None of the other rebel groups can boast what we've done!"

Some of the members of the Detemen League grew emotional and knelt down. Others cried and hugged each other. After living in Detemen IV like rats, they showed that they still possessed teeth.

Ves was the odd man out in this spontaneous emotional outburst. Compared to everyone's jubilation, he only felt weary and longed to return to the Wolf Mother. Only in the confines of the factory ship would Ves feel at home.

"What the Vesian nobles do to their commoners and vica versa is not my business." He reminded himself. "Only the interests of the Republic matters to me."

In that regard, stirring up the Kingdom by facilitating a rebellion certainly weakened the Kingdom.

Some time later, Ves entered an observation room that looked out into a plain interrogation room. For something as sensitive as this, the rebels didn't employ any projectors, for fear of leaking out this session. Having learnt his own lesson on how powerful hacking could be, Ves understood the necessity of these precautions.

A handful of other people stood in the room. Ves recognized Addy and Captain Orfan. Most of the others consisted of the highest-ranking rebel cadre.

It appeared that the rebels treated this interrogation with utmost importance.

A couple of medical doctors stood behind some sort of console that displayed Javier's every physiological reaction. Right now, they appeared to be administering some stimulants to his body.

"Careful with the dosage." A senior doctor warned. "Lord Javier has undergone many surgeries and treatments that optimized his body and mind."

This meant that Javier would also be more resilient to many forms of interrogation. Perhaps Lord Javier would still be forced to spill out all of his secrets if the Coalition managed to get their claws on him, but the rebels only possessed means comparable to a local law enforcement office. They didn't have access to better tools.

"He's waking up."

A groggy-eyed Javier woke up from the chair that bolted down his limbs. He tried to jerk at them, only to press his skin.

"Ouch!"

The young noble blinked a few times more and shrugged off the fog in his mind. He tried to stare ahead but didn't get blinded by the concentrated light that shone down onto his face.

"If that's your best attempt at disorienting me, then I've got nothing to fear from you scum!" The noble boasted with confidence.

Commander Breskin sat in the opposite seat. The rebel leader appeared to be alone in the room with Javier, but that couldn't be further from the truth. In the observation room Ves could see a number of operators sitting behind their consoles feeding in information and suggestions into Breskin's ear.

"You're alone, Javier. Your honor guard is dead or missing, and your household troops have scattered in the wind. There is no one left in Neron City or the entirety of Detemen IV for that matter that can come to your aid."

Javier spat at the table. "I know you won't let me go. Is your drivel meant to make me lose heart? Never! I know my own fate! I won't live past this day, and I've accepted this fact! So skip all the pleasantries and put a laser beam through my head!"

One of the doctors in the observation room scratched his head. "I thought the drugs and stimulants have caught on. The subject is supposed to be in a highly suggestible state!"

"That's why I told you that most of our preparation don't work. His brains work differently than ours. It's been augmented to such an extent that most of our drugs are ineffective."

Ves understood that the rebels wouldn't be able to resort to any easy means of getting Javier to open his mouth. Even torture wouldn't accomplish anything.

Therefore, Breskin didn't employ any fancy tricks of high-tech means of getting Javier to talk. The old commander opted to go for a plain but direct approach.

"I'm not interested in the secrets of your House." Breskin stated. "Nor am I eager to break you down. You're not even worth that much to us dead."

Javier stared down Breskin with resentful eyes while keeping his mouth shut.

"We both know there is one thing we'd like to obtain from you. Two, in fact, but we found one of those things from your cockpit."

"That thing was too for me to carry around while I escaped. My stealth suit doesn't allow me to bring anything anything of that size. How did you even

find me at the end? From what I know of you and your pathetic rabble, you should have been fooled!"

"We benefited from some outside help."

"Brighters." Javier snarled in a low tone. "It's one thing to overthrow our rule. I can respect your commitment to better your people, even if you sad sacks of meat don't deserve to crawl out of the mud where you belong. Joining forces with the Brighters is another matter. That's treason of the highest order!"

Some of the rebels in the observation room became affected by that accusation, while Captain Orfan shifted on her feet.

"We'd be better off if the Bright Republic won our generational war." Breskin grinned. "Call us traitors all you want. In my eyes, nobles like you are the real traitors here. Ever since you took up the reigns on Detemen IV, your very actions betrayed your duties to shepherd your people."

"Your people?" Javier raised his eyebrows. "None of you are my people! Lowborn filth like you don't deserve to be mentioned in the same sentence as my father and I."

Breskin shook his head. "You still adhere to those warped ideas. Let's go back to my main point. As I've mentioned, while we've obtained one of the things we're looking for, we know you still have the other thing in your mind."

"What do you want to do about it?" Javier grinned savagely at Breskin.

"I'd like to ask you politely to hand over the other thing."

The mood turned strange in the observation room. Everyone leaned forward in anticipation while Ves stood cluelessly in the rear. Even Captain Orfan appeared to be in on the secret.

What were these 'things' that Breskin referred to?

## Chapter 494 Missing

The interrogation turned into a strange direction. Breskin tried to coax their captive into giving up the other thing. Nobody in the observation room looked puzzled when the interrogator and the interrogated spoke of the 'thing' and the 'other thing'.

Was this a deliberate precaution against leaking out the true shapes of the 'things' to Ves?

That didn't make any sense. If so, the bedraggled Lord Javier should have been doing everything in his power to publicize the 'things' out of spite. That he played along proved that the significance of these 'things' were of such import that even he couldn't lightly mention them by name.

Over time, Ves realized that they adopted this terminology because they'd been trained to avoid leaking any inadvertent information from any hidden recorders and spying bugs. Though the observation and interrogation rooms had been swept as thoroughly as possible, that was only up to the standard of a third-rate state.

What if a greater power such as the Friday Coalition or even the Mech Trade Association listened in on their conversations? Certainly, they wouldn't devote a human to listen to their talk. Instead, they'd task some AIs to be on the lookout for certain key phrases that signified something of exceptional value.

Therefore, as long as everyone agreed to abide by generic words such as 'things', they wouldn't be able to attract too much attention from any high-tech listeners. At the very least, even if some AI suspected that they talked about something valuable, they wouldn't be able to figure out any clues.

"I have nothing to say to you." Lord Javier responded smugly to Breskin. It was as if he had the upper hand in the interrogation room. "The 'other thing' is safe as long as I'm alive, I can assure you.

Even a dummy like Ves could see that the lordling held all the cards in this game. The Detemen League and the Flagrant Vandals attached a lot of importance to these so-called 'things'. So much so that Breskin seriously contemplated whether to free Lord Javier in exchange for obtaining the 'other thing'.

After ten more minutes of cajoling, Breskin finally shook his head. "We will talk again after we have evacuated from this star system. For now, you will be coming with us."

He glanced at his comm and pressed a button, causing Javier's restraints to inject a substance in his bloodstream. The captive quickly lost consciousness again. A pair of guards entered the interrogation room and took him away.

"Show's over now."

"Damn, I really hoped that Lord Javier would give up what he knew."

"There's no chance of that as long as he's sober. We're going to have to work for it. With an augmented mind and body like his, it might take months to compel him to spill the 'other thing'."

Ves wandered out of the observation room with more questions than answers. He even began to doubt the purpose of this entire operation. Could this entire operation have been set off to obtain the 'things' in Javier's possession?

"Probably not. It's likely a combination of factors that led to the Vandals choosing to invade the Detemen System. Hitting multiple birds with one stone, basically."

In any case, now that the Flagrant Vandals completed all of their objectives on this planet, it was time to leave. Ves received a notification that he was assigned to the second convoy to the Vandal beachhead on this planet.

"You'll be leaving soon, right?" A voice spoke from behind.



"I am."

"I never got to thank you for all the help you gave us." Addy said. "Lord Javier is much more capable of hiding than we thought. If you hadn't pointed us in the right direction, we would have let him slip. On behalf of the Detemen League, we express our thanks to your aid. No matter how far our paths diverge from this day, you'll always be a friend to us."

At least the rebels showed their appreciation to him, unlike Captain Orfan.

Ves smiled back and shook her hand when she extended it. "It's my pleasure. Any competent mech designer can do the same. I suggest you obtain your own means of fielding mechs when you escape to the stars. It's too dangerous to roam around in space without the protection of mechs."

"We are working on it. We have to start from scratch, so it will take years to build up a mech tradition in our group."

For a local rebel movement, the Detemen League enjoyed a fair amount of support, especially in the later years of Lord Javier's despotic reign. They didn't lack for numbers, but in military terms this only granted them access to lots of cannon fodder.

They lacked an elite or sophisticated force that could act as their fist. While they mastered other forms of warfare, their severe deficiency in mechs would become a fatal flaw in the wildlands of space. No one respected any other vehicles except for mechs.

"Do you have any plans for the future? Where are you going to settle next, and what will you do in the coming years?"

Talk of the future caused Addy to grow melancholic. "I've never left this planet, do you know that? Most of us don't. Leaving our home planets for the first time is going to be hard for us. Becoming vagabonds in space is not what we

intended to become, but that appears to be the life set out for us. Many other rebel groups in the Kingdom have been pushed off their planets over time."

"And the most successful ones emerge to become regional powerhouses, I guess."

"That is how most regional rebel movements have come into being. They no longer become so attached to a single planet or star system, but set their sights over an entire region or Duchy."

A rebel movement without a home still needed to claim some turf. Perhaps in a couple of years, the Detemen League would call themselves by another name.

"Well, though I know your chances aren't that great, I hope the ideals you're fighting for will eventually succeed."

"Our cause has always been a stretch, Mr. Larkinson. Even we are realistic enough to recognize the apparent futility of what we are aiming to achieve."

"Then why fight in the first place? From what I've seen so far, while most commoners don't care so much about the nobles, they don't hold very strong animosity against the ruling class. It's going to be extremely hard to shift the public against the nobles at this rate."

"It is hard to convince the ignorant flock to open their eyes, yet we never pause. We can't. Even if we're nothing but annoyances to the nobles, at least we are expressing our existence. The presence of rebel groups like ours restrain the nobles from going too far. The more depraved they become, the faster we grow."

In other words, even if the rebels possessed a limited amount of influence and power, the threat of their existence and the possibility of fueling their rise curbed the worst excesses of the nobles that possessed absolute power over their territories.

Tradition, laws and culture might have given the nobles the right to rule their lands, but the foundation of their power lay in how much the commoners supported them. Any territory with a discontented population became a net drain on a noble's earnings.

"If I may ask, there is one more thing I'm curious about. During Javier's interrogation, Breskin keeps asking about the... stuff. I don't know if I'm the only one in the observation room who wasn't clued in, but can you tell me something about what you were talking about?"

Addy pursed her lips. "If you don't know the true meaning of that word, then you shouldn't know about it in the first place. I'm sorry Mr. Larkinson, but knowledge of what they talked about is only available on a need-to-know basis."

That definitely shut up any avenues for questioning. Ves couldn't ask anything else about the sensitive topic surrounding Javier's capture. All he knew was that the rebels would be taking the little bastard with them in their flight from the system.

After Ves said goodbye to Addy, he walked over to the shuttle filled with supplies and a couple of men that was about to head over to the Vandals. Ves saw Captain Orfan sitting in the front, but he didn't go up to greet her. Instead, he sat in the rear of the shuttle.

The armored shuttle began to lift off a few minutes later. Escorted by a bunch of other vehicles, the shuttle ascended fairly low in the air and navigated over Neron City, straying far away from any compounds with a significant amount of defenders.

The journey proceeded quietly. None of the local powers dared to intercept their shuttle. The moment they showed any hostility, the Vandals would surely come and crush them. It was better for them to wait out this invasion and

thank their lucky stars that they'd been able to make it through the crisis intact.

Ves almost expected something to happen anyway. Throughout his unprepared adventure on the surface of Detemen IV, a lot of things that could have gone wrong actually did go wrong. All of the pressure kept Ves in a high-strung mood, and he expected trouble from every corner.

That nothing happened during the flight only raised his hackles a bit. The possibility for a major disaster always hung over head.

"Huh. We made it through alive."

Ves stepped out of the shuttle with bewilderment. The armored shuttle successfully managed to cross half the city and reach the small beachhead the Flagrant Vandals initially set up as their temporary base during their stay on this planet.

The Vandal ground force erected dozens of prefab structures. Most of them appeared to be warehouses that received incoming loot and sorted them out into compact containers to be shipped to orbit.

A new transport or shuttle descended from the air around every two minutes. Bots led by a few cargo handlers stuffed them full of containers and other goods before sending the vehicles back to orbit. The sheer amount of vehicles touching down or lifting off all the time hinted to Ves that the Vandals obtained plenty of valuables during their raids on the local manufacturing complexes.

Ves loosely estimated that the Flagrant Vandals wouldn't be able to pay off their enormous debts, but the profits should be enough to half their financial obligations.

Of course, this only applied to the detachment over Detemen IV. The other half of the fleet must have raided a lot of valuables as well over Detemen II.

"Ves! Is that you?!"

"Pierce! What are you doing down here?!"

Ves never expected to see an Apprentice Mech Designer on the ground. Seeing Pierce Yuvalis again put a smile on his face. They hugged each other in brotherly camaraderie, not caring for everyone else's stares.

"I volunteered to go down the surface." He explained a short moment later. He thumbed his finger towards one of the nearby heavy mechs that entrenched itself in some sort of purpose-built half-bunker. "I've been assigned to the Akkara design team, but I don't possess a natural affinity for heavy mechs. It's hard to see them in action in space, so I asked the professor to send me down with the ground force so I can stay close to the Akkaras without exposing me to too much danger."

"Has it been useful? I was preoccupied with trying to survive on the other side of Neron City, so I haven't been able to catch up to the battles that took place here."

"You haven't? I've witnessed so many maneuvers, some of which you should definitely know about! Let me bring you back to my temporary office so I can show you some of the recordings."

"Ah, one more thing. Has there been any word of Alloc?"

Pierce faltered a bit. "He's still missing as far as the Flagrant Vandals are concerned. Professor Velten is all worked up about it and she's been nagging the forces on the ground to expand their search perimeter."

Alloc hadn't been found yet? That did not bode well for the Journeyman Mech Designer. Ves grew rather concerned by now. He shouldn't have been out of contact for so long. Even if he became indisposed for some reason, his comm should have enabled the Vandals to hone in on his last known location. That

the search parties failed to sniff out his trail meant that the Journeyman's fate wasn't so simple.

### Chapter 495 Two Fleets

His colleague from the same batch of conscripted mech designers led him around the temporary base. Ves thought that someone like Pierce who grew up under a mech designer from the Friday Coalition should have experienced a lot of sights, but the man behaved like a kid who entered a candy store for the first time.

"Look at this Ves! This scrapheap is all the mechs they'd been able to salvage from the defenders of the city's manufacturing complexes. Most of these scraps aren't very valuable, so the Vandals plan to leave them behind."

The sheer amount of mechs and mech parts piled up showed Ves that the Vandals overwhelmed a lot of complexes. They took back the goods they produced and the most valuable materials used in their production. They also dragged back any spare wrecks and raided the most valuable components out of their hulks.

The mech graveyard in front of him appeared notable in that over half of their mechs lost their armor plating. The Vandals must have stripped them out because they incorporated valuable exotics.

Pierce showed him several other sights, all the while describing the battles the ground forces fought. The young man was visibly enamored with all that had happened.

Ves was different. What Pierce described was actually a routine invasion against a semi-prepared but inferior defense force. The mechs aligned to House Eneqqin put up a valiant fight, but their lack of numbers skewed the battles against them from the start. There was no doubt that the Vandals would gain ultimate control over Neron City.

He had to stop himself from shaking his head or giving Pierce a patronizing look. After living through harrowing times on Groening IV or the Glowing Planet, what happened on Detemen IV seemed like a cakewalk.

This was the benefit of experience, he guessed.

A mech designer that saw more of the galaxy possessed a wider perspective. This extra life experience broadened their vision and numbed them to the mundane things that others found special.

It also made Ves feel as if he stood apart from an inexperienced mech designer like Pierce. Though the man helped design many mechs while under the employ of a large mech manufacturer, it also isolated him from experiencing the outcome of his own work.

Ves felt that was important somehow, especially now that he compared his own life experience to Pierce's.

At the end of the tour, Ves and Pierce waited to be sent back into space. Once they finally received a message to board the next transport that would lift off into orbit, Ves eagerly headed towards the vehicle.

"Whoa there, Ves! What's the hurry?"

"I don't want to miss my ride!"

Ves became a bit paranoid about being left behind on this awful planet. While not as bad as some of the places he visited, he still didn't wish to linger any longer than he had to.

More than an hour later, Ves finally transferred over to a combat carrier. While he would only be aboard the ship for a few days, he already felt as if he returned home.

The Flagrant Vandals accumulated many different models of combat carriers, so every ship looked unique. Different from the Stubby Growler, the

Antecedent took on an even fatter shape. This reduced her maneuverability under atmosphere, but in the vacuum of space, most of her mobility remained unaffected.

Though Ves possessed little expertise in spacecraft, he traveled aboard many different ships. In some, he even got the opportunity to be part of the crew, so he picked up a few things here and there where his expertise in mech design overlapped with ship engineering.

Ves didn't know anyone aboard the Antecedent, and the Vandal officers didn't spare a glance at them. Ves and Pierce mostly stayed holed up in their cabins as they waited for the Vandals to depart from the star system.

An alarm quickly blared over their heads, only to shut off a second after.

"What's that?!" Pierce jumped up.

"I don't know, but if the captain of the ship shut off the alarm right after, it's nothing serious." Ves guessed.

They both left their cabins and wandered over to the mess hall where spacers simply couldn't shut up. There, they overheard the reason why the alarms had been tripped.

"The Vesians reinforcements have arrived."

A bit sooner than expected, the first Vesian fleet arrived at the outer regions of the Detemen System from the closest star system.

"They're here fast. I thought they would be taking their sweet time."

"This system's neighbors can't be seen dragging their feet too blatantly. They'll fall out of favor with the Duchess if they scorn her commands."

"How long do we have?"



"Jimmy told me that we've got to scram within four hours. Any longer and we'll get caught by the leading elements of the reinforcement fleet."

Four hours was a very short time. The ground forces needed to evacuate with extra haste and leave behind their less valuable loot at this rate. While unfortunate, the early arrival of the reinforcement fleet was well within their expectation.

Though Ves hated to admit it, the constant insistence on haste worked in their favor. Though their operations on Detemen IV didn't proceed very smoothly, they hadn't suffered many delays. Everything proceeded roughly on schedule, and the Vandal presence on the ground rapidly diminished as every working mech got boosted into orbit.

With cargo holds laden with mechs, materials and other goods, the fleet element under the command of Major Verle started to approach the nearest Lagrange point.

Ves and Pierce returned to their cabins for safety and looked at the fleet's progress on a small projector that displayed their position in the star system.

He could see that the Vandals that orbited Detemen II took their sweet time in extracting from the planet. Since their planet was deeper within the star system, it would take a bit more time for the Vesians to intercept them. This gave the Vandals orbiting the second planet from the twin suns a larger buffer into getting all of their affairs in order.

Another fleet of rebel ships emerged from the surface of Detemen IV. It appeared the rebels stowed them somewhere deep and obscured their existence until the time had arrived for them to depart.

"What a sad collection of ships."

"They don't appear to be in the best shape." Ves concurred with Pierce.

Compared to the worn but threatening shapes of the Vandal combat carriers, the ragtag collection of second-hand ships looked as if they belonged to a failed gang. The cargo haulers and transport ships limped slowly towards the Langrange point with barely functional thrusters.

"Seems like they didn't have the funds or resources to spare for better ships."

Once they reached the point where opposing forces of gravity caused the area to have no strong force of gravity acting on it, the rebel ships transitioned into FTL without a hitch. At least the rebels must have taken some precautions with regards to their delicate FTL drives.

"Lord Javier is supposed to be aboard one of their ships, right?"

"That's what I heard." Ves nodded. "Though I'm not sure if we should believe everything we heard. Our own side has fooled us more than once."

He couldn't discount the fact that the rebels loudly spoke about taking custody of Lord Javier on purpose. It wouldn't be above the Flagrant Vandals to play along with this ruse and quietly bring the noble away aboard one of their own vessels.

"Did you see him in person?" Pierce asked in an excited tone. Everything that happened so far has kept him in high spirits.

"I did, briefly."

"Is he as much of a douchebag as everyone says he is?"

"I think so. I can't tell you much about the guy except to say that most of the stereotypes about him are probably true. He's a real piece of work."

Ves also got the sense that Lord Javier was a lot more dangerous than he appeared. Even with the doctors stripped him of all of his implants and hidden tools, the noble still emanated a faint aura of threat that Ves only perceived from truly dangerous individuals such as Doctor Jutland.

He shook his head. Jutland was dead and the lordling was in their custody. What did he have to be so scared about? He turned his attention back to the display.

Over at the far side of the display, the ominous shapes of around a dozen combat carriers approached with indomitable purpose. Ves guessed that they likely didn't possess the strength to crush either of the two Vandal fleet detachments, but possessed enough strength to interrupt any FTL transitions out of this star system.

Human FTL drives worked reliably in space with few gravitic disturbances. The depths of interstellar space formed the most ideal circumstances to transition out of the material dimensions, but sufficient distance from stars and Lagrange points formed tranquil enough areas that FTL still worked.

The incoming Vesian ships therefore weren't out to get into a slugging match with the Flagrant Vandals.

They instead planned to harass their FTL transition by disturbing the Lagrange points where the Vandals currently flew towards. Any kind of gravitic mines and other means of generating artificial gravity could halt their escape and delay their departure until more reinforcements arrived.

Some of their fears came true when more reinforcement fleets arrived. Luckily, they all started at the same distance from the binary stars, and they arrived at a further angle from Detemen IV. This basically meant they needed to fly for more than five straight hours to reach the industrial planet.

"All of the other reinforcements will be too late." Ves nodded. "Just as expected."

The Vandals got the timing down pretty well. They gave up on hauling more loot from the surface at a certain time and they departed for the nearest Lagrange point with thirty minutes to spare.

In space combat, thirty minutes was cutting it close. Ves could even imagine some of the crew of the Antecedent grumbling about how much risks Major Verle had taken in order to retrieve as much valuables from Detemen IV as possible.

Fortunately, they encountered no delays or unforeseen problem. Only until the Antecedent entered into FTL along with the rest of the fleet did Ves truly relax.

"We're finally out of the woods!"

Though the Vandal Fleet still faced a perilous journey to return to Republic space, at least they overcame the important hurdle.

Ves felt a bit directionless again in the next couple of days. From what he eavesdropped from the crew, the ships under Major Verle currently headed towards a lifeless star system. There, they would meet with the VRF and some other rebel movement who would subsequently guide them to their next hop in their journey.

Strangely enough, Major Verle's detachment wouldn't converge with Colonel Lowenfield's detachment at their next destination. Ves had to approach a spacer and ask her in person to learn why.

"If you remember the system map, Detemen IV is located on one side of the twin stars while Detemen II is located roughly perpendicular from the stars and the other planet. This basically means it's a bit troublesome for Colonel Lowenfield's ships to transition immediately towards our upcoming destination."

Basically, the ships that raided Detemen II wouldn't be able to rendez-vous with the ships that attacked Detemen IV without cutting through the gravity field of the twin stars.

Ships that attempted to do so never met a good end. It was already perilous enough to try to transition into FTL at a Lagrange point.

In the end, this meant that the Flagrant Vandals had to make do with two fleets at half strength.

That made him a bit uncomfortable. There was safety in numbers. Traversing through the heart of Vesian space with around fifty of their usual strength put both fleets in significant danger. The sooner they merged back together, the better.

### Chapter 496 Unwind

Their brief stay aboard the Antecedent yielded little excitement. Ves got to relax for the first time in almost a week, while Pierce still brimmed with excitement of all the fighting he witnessed on the surface.

"Man, calm down Pierce. You're jumping around like a rookie whose cherry got popped. It's starting to become embarrassing!"

"I'm sorry Ves." Pierce apologized and quickly calmed down. "It's just that I've never witnessed the majesty of mechs at such a massive scales. Numerous companies of mechs moved around and clashed against each other in the suburbs of Neron City. Sometimes, over three-hundred mechs battled at once!"

That was nothing to Ves. He once witnessed the dreadful scale of two entire mech divisions trying to murder each other without reserve. The collision of a handful of mech companies paled in comparison.

"If you've learned anything from what you've seen, make sure to write them down before you forget them. There's no guarantee we'll witness another battle of this scale any time soon."

No matter how impressive such battles appeared, they drained a lot of money to both sides. Without any gains, a money-conscious mech regiment such as the Flagrant Vandals would never willingly throw themselves at formidable enemies.

The next couple of days, Ves and Pierce drew up their sleeves and helped with the aftermath of the largely successful operation. The spacers aboard the Antecedent took stock of the casualties and the haphazard piles of loot they stuffed inside the cargo hold.

The two mech designers spent most of their time assessing the battle damage of the Antecedent's complement of mechs, which wasn't much. As a spaceborn-oriented combat carrier, she took part of the initial battle and chase of the Vesian garrison fleet the Vandals smashed at the start of the operation.

Because that battle mainly unfolded into an ambush on the Vesians, the Antecedent's mechs sustained relatively little battle damage.

Of course, chasing down a cornered rat often led to retaliation. Mech pilots with nothing to lose sometimes lashed out with all their hearts, which led to a handful of heavily damaged spaceborn mechs.

Surprisingly enough, the Inheritor light mechs took the brunt of the damage.

"These mechs aren't very difficult to repair." Ves judged. He studied the spaceborn skirmishers extensively, and possessed a moderate grasp on their design. "The only challenge is to perform them as cost-efficient as possible. The easily solution would be to scrap the damaged portions and replace them with pristine equivalents."

At their current state, such a ham-fisted repair procedure would waste a lot of the fleet's stock of rare exotics. These types of exotics needed to be bought from dedicated suppliers. The Vandals wouldn't be able to plunder them from a random trade convoy or manufacturing complex.

"No, the best option is to restore the damaged components as best as we can."

With the help of the chief technician, Ves devised individual repair plans for each damaged Inheritor mech. He took into account the skill level of the mech

technicians and low-ranking mech designers aboard the Antecedent. He quickly found out that the crew wouldn't be able to accomplish the most complicated repairs with the facilities at hand.

This wasn't an issue as the fleet enjoyed the services of several capable logistics ships. While the massive Wolf Mother accompanied Colonel Lowenfield's detachment that escaped in another direction, the smaller logistic vessels at Major Verle's disposal possessed sufficient capabilities by themselves. Ves merely needed to queue some orders for the most difficult parts to help the repairs along.

Ves also spent some time getting debriefed by a Vandal intelligence officer. This was mainly a dry affair where he mechanically recounted what he did aboard the Stubby Growler and when he crash-landed onto the surface of Detemen IV.

When he mentioned that his assistance was pivotal in tracking down Lord Javier, the officer raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Are you certain that you haven't overstated your importance? Be aware that we have access to your logs on your comm."

"Go ahead, sir." Ves waved his hand. "The logs should clearly show how much I contributed to Lord Javier's capture."

He knew that his military comm wouldn't be such a simple device. It figured that it had some way of keeping tabs on his activities.

"Very well, Mr. Larkinson. You will hear from us later if we need some clarification. You can go back to work now."

Recounting recent events put Ves in an introspective mood. The relative period of tranquility aboard the Antecedent allowed him to unwind his nerves. While this relieved some of burdens, thinking about the chaotic circumstances of his accidental deployment on the surface of Detemen IV ruined his mood.

He couldn't help but contemplate on whether he made a number of big mistakes. He could justify small mistakes and certain oversights on account of working under difficult circumstances. No one would be able to think clearly in the midst of several crises.

The only mistake that Ves really got hung up on was his extended use of his self-fabricated comm. Even though he always knew that the Mech Corps and by extension the Flagrant Vandals treated foreign electronic devices with paranoia, he still dared to make use of a civilian-grade comm.

In ordinary circumstances, such a sloppy oversight would have earned him a court-martial!

"Am I in trouble for this?"

Ves weighed the possibilities and tentatively judged that it wasn't likely the Vandals would bring it up. He was alone for quite a while and tried to survive on the streets by himself. Such a lapse in security was excusable.

It was less excusable for him to continue to hang on to the comm when he came under Captain Orfan's wing. In that, he made a genuine blunder.

"Although... it might not be due to my mistake that the base got bombarded."

As a local hegemon, House Eneqqin possessed many means of observations. The Vandals under Captain Orfan's command didn't surpass more than sixty or seventy servicemen. Most crucially, they lacked a hacker specialist who would be able to fool every enemy sensor in the vicinity.

"It's likely that House Eneqqin has become aware that Captain Orfan took over the former premises of the Dastardly Handsome Bastards as soon as the takeover started. They just took longer than I thought to get their assets in position to bombard the base."



This possibility meant that even if Ves screwed up, his mistake might not have made a difference. If anything, it would have confirmed what House Eneqqin already knew.

Ves felt easier after coming up with his guess. Even if this hadn't actually happened, it still served to alleviate his guilt somewhat.

"I need to go back to work."

Days passed. Once they arrived at their destination, the fleet that attacked Detemen IV took stock and began to transfer people and supplies among themselves. Major Verle ordered a comprehensive reorganization before his fleet resumed their flight.

In their haste to outrun enemy reinforcements, the Flagrant Vandals focused solely on speed. This had the unfortunate effect of stuffing mechs, salvage and supplies at any available space on hand. This led to many inefficiencies, such as storing an abundant of raw materials aboard a combat carrier while storing a lot of spare mechs aboard a cargo hauler.

Thus, the moment the fleet emerged from FTL, numerous amounts of shuttles and transports bounced from ship to ship to reorganize all of their cargo, mechs and personnel.

Ves received orders to transfer to the current flagship of this detachment, a command-oriented combat carrier called the Shield of Hispania. The Antecedent where they had been hastily dumped in wouldn't allow them to utilize their capabilities to the fullest.

Other mech designers from the Vandal design teams got reallocated as well. Pierce for example would be taking up a post at one of the logistics ships of Major Verle's fleet.

As Ves arrived on board the Shield of Hispania, he sighed as he studied a map of yet another combat carrier. Contrary to her name, the Shield of

Hispania couldn't endure a lot of hits. Compared to the Stubby Growler, the Hispania's ship model was a lot older and had gone through many battles.

These battles slowly stripped her original excellent armor plating. With the Flagrant Vandals tight on money, they couldn't afford to replace the damaged armor with plating of the same quality. They instead resorted to a cheaper armor system.

"Even with their ships, the Flagrant Vandals are forced to make a lot of compromises."

A fully funded mech regiment would never concern themselves over their budget to this extent. While mechs formed the primary mode of combat in human space, every large outfit on the scale of a mech regiment required a fleet of sturdy ships.

Plenty of stories existed of mech commanders who invested all of their outfit's resources on mechs. They barely paid any attention to the ships meant to convey their precious mechs.

Without fail, all of their enemies who studied these outfits in detail exploited this vulnerability. Though their mechs fought valiantly in space or on the ground, cheap second-hand ships such as carriers converted out of decommissioned haulers always blew up after suffering damage that would be a glancing blow to proper carriers.

No matter how expensive and deadly their mechs, without any ships left to transfer them across interstellar distances, they became completely ineffective. All of that money invested in building them up turned into loose sand without the means to travel to a different planet or transition to another star system.

In fact, Ves grasped the necessity of a good ship as well. Otherwise, he wouldn't have splurged billions of credits of his personal fortune to acquire the Trieste-class light carriers for the Avatars of Myth.

No matter if it came to mechs or ships, you got what you paid for, to a certain extent. The Shield of Hispania obviously used to be a prized vessel among the Flagrant Vandals, but after enduring a lot of abuse and inadequate repairs, her effective combat ability received a substantial truncation.

Without referencing any other documents, Ves could deduce all of that from the map projected by his comm and a visual scan of the exterior of the carrier as his shuttle approached one of the hangar bays.

More than that, Ves also noticed that the command center of the Shield of Hispania sat a bit awkwardly in the center of the map. The command center was a lot smaller than the one aboard the Stubby Growler, and the compartments around it adopted fairly awkward shapes.

"The command center must have been added later on as a retrofit. The shipwrights who designed and implemented this change tore up a lot of stuff as they did so."

This inevitably weakened the integrity of the Hispania's hull and internal structure. It would be as if Ves crudely added a flight system to a landbound mech. Such a thick and heavy mech had not been designed to accommodate the space and energy draw that a flight system demanded. Thus, the only way to merge these two together would be to jury-rig a solution.

All of this pointed out that the Shield of Hispania could potentially crumble after receiving a couple of soft blows! The dual weaknesses of weak armor coverage and weak internal structure meant his berth was exceptionally vulnerable to kinetic and explosive damage!

"At least she won't succumb after suffering a couple of laser hits. Even if her armor is of inferior quality, the sheer amount of thickness will help with absorbing a lot of energy."

"Switching out the Hispania's original compressed armor system for a much thicker uncompressed armor system also slows her down to a major extent."

It was as if a professional sprinter grew fat. There was no way the sportsman would be winning any prizes at such a deplorable condition.

Ves would rather remain aboard the Antecedent. He even preferred to be transferred aboard one of the fragile logistics ships like Pierce because the Vandals cherished their safety.

#### Chapter 497 Wrong Direction

Shortly after he arrived aboard the Shield of Hispania, Ves received a summons from the major himself. He handed his luggage towards a hauler bot that automatically brought it back to his cabin.

With that taken care of, Ves followed the map and marched towards the conference room in question. The expansive room that could have accommodated over fifty officers or mech pilots looked hollow and empty when no one arrived as of yet.

Ves picked a random seat in the middle of the conference room and plopped down on it. He wondered why the gruff major went through the trouble of summoning him in person when he could have sent him a notification on his comm.

"There must be something important he wants to discuss with me."

Hopefully the major would be able to dispel some of the questions lingering in his mind. He acquired several over the course of the flight from the Detemen System.

"Ves?" A faintly familiar voice sounded behind him.

"Iris!"

Ves looked surprised as the Vesian mech designer traipsed into the conference room after the hatch silently slid open. The woman smiled radiantly at him as she took a seat next to his own.

"I heard that something dreadful happened to you! Did you really escape the Stubby Growler as the Heavenfall missiles broke her apart and crash land onto Detemen IV?"

"It's all true, sadly." He sighed. "How much have you heard?"

"Not so much. I've been assigned aboard another combat carrier that remained in orbit and performed routine duties during the operation."

Ves briefed her on what he lived through, though he couldn't say too much because some of it touched upon classified information. The officer who debriefed him a few days ago forced him to sign a document which enumerated the topics he needed to keep mum on. Naturally, any mention of the 'things' would instantly land him in the brig.

"It's amazing how you survived all alone!" Iris said in astonishment as she referred to his starting moments when he crash-landed in the park. "What is this amazing weapon you used?"

"It's something I got my hands on coincidentally."

Explaining away the Amastendira's contribution to his survival was exceedingly difficult. Ves had to admit his story contained a lot of holes in that regard. When he got debriefed, he tried to skim over it as much as possible.

In any case, his ambiguous talk managed fend off the officer's inquiries, at least that he was aware of. Ves bet on the that the logging function of his military comm possessed a lot of limits. Such a thin device on his wrist

wouldn't be able to keep track of everything he did with perfect fidelity. Thus, the acquisition of the Amastendira shouldn't be a clear-cut matter.

He also underwent numerous frisks and body scans while he transferred from the surface to the Antecedent, and when he transferred from the Antecedent to the Shield of Hispania.

None of those security checks produced any contraband. Even if the logs of his military comm showed that Ves pulled out the Amastendira from thin air, they probably would have thought it was a glitch or something.

Still, a bright-eyed person might also conclude that the Amastendira was a powerful hidden trump card awarded by Master Olson. Only someone as wealthy and powerful as her could gift him such a high-tech toy.

Ves actually hoped that the Vandals bought into this misconception. More and more, Ves appreciated the benefit his status as Master Olson's apprentice brought to him. He could whip it out like a talisman anytime he faced a difficult question that shared some relations with the System.

Faced with Iris' insatiable curiosity, he let her make her own conclusions.

"I don't want to talk too much about it. By the way, have you heard if Alloc has been retrieved yet?"

"Alloc Brandstad? No. As far as I'm aware of, he's missing in action. They couldn't find any trace of him in space or on the surface."

This affected Ves quite a bit. The Journeyman Mech Designer had been very considerate towards Ves, which was more than what the other two journeymen from the design department could boast.

Alloc was more than his superior. He was also a mentor of sorts to Ves.

"Then... is he dead?"

"We can never be sure of that." Iris shook her head. "Missing in action means he's missing. More than that, no one can say. It could be his crash ball incurred heavy damage that might have damaged its locators and transceivers when it escaped from the Stubby Growler's destruction. He might still be floating in deep space, though he won't starve or suffocate to death because the Vesian reinforcements would likely pick up his crash ball's presence."

This was only one of many possibilities. Ves grimaced as his thoughts took a darker turn. "Maybe he never survived the Stubby Growler's destruction. Though he sat next to me in the command center, his crash ball might have taken a very different turn that launched him straight at the carrier's power reactor or something."

"Don't let the worst-case scenarios put you down. Even if it doesn't sound very likely, he may still be alive. Don't let go of that hope."

"Are you speaking from personal experience, Iris?"

She smiled ruefully at him. "When you mix in with the Vesian Revolutionary Front, you quickly learn that retirement isn't an option."

Rebellion against a state condemned a person to the life of a fugitive. Space was large and empty, so enemies of the state could easily hide their presence somewhere. Yet to live in some barren rock or in the middle of interstellar space didn't pay the bills.

Ships needed fuel and mechs required maintenance. People needed to be fed, but more importantly they also needed to strive for a dream. Without purpose, rebel movements tended to devolve into pirate gangs.

Principles couldn't be maintained in isolation. Goals would always be forgotten when progress became stalled. Therefore, rebel movements constantly faced the pressure to remain proactive and take a lot of risks.

Accomplishing goals, placating their members and achieving a lot of renown among the people kept these movements alive, though the risks always came at a price.

"Have you lost many friends?" Ves asked.

"Some." She mused. "Thankfully none of my family. As mech designers and specifically as neural interface experts, we enjoy a fairly high status in the VRF. We aren't exposed to as much danger as our mech pilots. Still, accidents can happen, so the possibility of what happened to Alloc always hangs over the Jupiters."

The VRF might be able to extend their tentacles across the entire Kingdom, but they wouldn't be able to fool the ruling powers all the time. Back at home, the Republic regularly tracked down the bases of the Bentheim Liberation Movement and killed all of the rebels they found inside.

The Republic wasn't magnanimous enough to expend an excessive amount of effort in securing prisoners from the noncombatants. Not after all the atrocities the BLM inflicted among civilians.

After a few more minutes of chitchat, Major Verle finally entered the conference room. He looked at Ves and Iris and nodded silently before storming over to the seat opposite of the conference table.

Once he sat down across from the pair, he stared at them with an unnerving expression. "Mr. Larkinson. I'm glad to see your escape from the Stubby Growler hasn't turned you into an imbecile."

What was Ves supposed to say to that. He tried to keep his face as neutral as possible. "Major."

"And the lovely Miss Jupiter. Thank you for continuing to liaise between us and the VRF. We'll be relying on your organization to evade the Vesian defense fleets that are out for our blood."



"It's our pleasure, major." She said. "The VRF is satisfied with the conclusion of the Detemen operation. Enabling the local Detemen League in tearing down Lord Javier from his throne will go a long way in dispelling the infallible aura wrapped around the nobility."

Ves faintly suspected that Iris tried to pad his own accomplishments with those words. He played an integral part in pleasing the Detemen League, after all. The more Iris hinted that they felt pleased at his contribution, the more Major Verle might begin to appreciate his help.

Fat chance of that actually happening though.

"Let's get down to business." The Major looked down upon the data pad in his grasp. "By completing our objectives in the Detemen System, our fleet is entitled to the assistance of the VRF in smuggling us out of the Kingdom, am I correct?"

"That is so, major." Iris nodded gently. "The agreement is still in effect. We acknowledge that the 6th Flagrant Vandals have played their part."

"That's good to hear, because there's a change of plans. We don't want to return to the Tarry region."

"Pardon, sir?" Iris blinked. "Where else do you wish to go if not your home region at the other side of the border?"

"This is where it gets a little complicated. For various reasons, we have business to take care of. Don't worry, the Vandal ships under Colonel Lowenfield's command will continue to follow the original plan, so all of your organization's preparations haven't been made in vain."

"What is it you are intending to do, major?"

Miss Jupiter, new information and new circumstances compel us to run another mission at a location outside of Vesian or Brighter space. For this

reason, the ships under my command will not be heading towards the rendezvous system and merge with the colonel's fleet. Instead, we are to form a separate task force that will run a special mission in Reinald space."

This caused Ves and Iris to widen their eyes.

"You wish to take your task force to the Reinald Republic?! That state is on the other side of the Vesia Kingdom's border! It will take you further and further away from the Bright Republic!"

If Ves didn't know that Major Verle held unquestioning loyalty to Colonel Lowenfield, he would have suspected him of attempting to desert and begin anew as an independent.

"If the VRF wishes to know more about our intentions, then I suggest you contact your liaison that is with Colonel Lowenfield's fleet and have them ask the details from the colonel herself. I'm not at liberty to divulge the details of our task force's mission."

Iris asked a few more questions, but Major Verle continued to stonewall her at every turn. Their mission must certainly be a sensitive one because the major hardly clarified anything at all. The only thing they needed to hear was that the task force needed to arrive at a certain star system within the Reinald Republic within two months.

"I'll be honest with you, major. Two months will be very tight." Iris determined.

"A legitimate trade convoy can make the same journey in a week, maybe two if they take the safest route. Yet for a massive task force like yours, it will be an incredible challenge, especially since we need to contact all of the regional rebel movements along the way and strike a deal with each and everyone of them. I'll have to warn you now, their asking prices will assuredly be exuberant."

Major Verle dismissed her concerns. "Colonel Lowenfield is prepared to pay a good price. If our sovies or credits are insufficient, we can also pay in military assistance, much like we helped the Detemen League. Our only demand is that it must not divert too much time from our journey to the Reinald Republic."

Obviously, such a last-minute change of plans would still upset the VRF. Iris looked very troubled all this time, and she foresaw a lot of yelling and browbeating in the coming weeks as the VRF tried to get the local bullies to play along.

Still, from what she heard, Colonel Lowenfield would absolutely make it worthwhile for them to facilitate the task force's sudden journey.

"On account of the colonel, the VRF may probably agree to your request, but I may not be sure. I am only a liaison, you see."

"I understand, miss."

After that, the major finally turned to other man in the room.

Somehow, Ves felt as if a lot of trouble was about to land in his lap as well.

#### Chapter 498 Resourceful

Major Verle went through rough times the past week. Not only did he shoulder responsibility for the Vandal detachment responsible for attacking Detemen IV, he also had to continue to play the shepherd for a couple of months more.

The operation on Detemen IV already proved to be a harrowing ordeal for Verle and his subordinates. Not only did they lose at least two combat carriers, some of their other ships sustained substantial damage. That they could slip into FTL without hiccups was already a minor miracle.

Around forty ships of different shapes and sizes relied on his leadership. Each came with a crew ranging from dozens to hundreds. From the humblest cargo haulers to the largest logistic ships, they all pooled their efforts into supporting the upkeep of up to a thousand active mechs.

In fact, this was a lot of responsibility to shoulder for a mech major. From what Ves had gathered from the mech designer boot camp, the officer needed to be at least a lieutenant colonel in order to wield so much authority.

When Ves glanced at Major Verle while he discussed some matters with Iris, he suddenly realized he didn't know anything about the man. What was his origin? How did he fit in with the Flagrant Vandals? How much trust did Colonel Lowenfield put in him?

These questions became a lot more relevant as it seemed that Ves would spend a lot of time under his wing.

"Mr. Larkinson." The mech officer finally turned to him and addressed him with the usual veiled aggression typical to mech officers. "I'm glad to see you've survived the Stubby Growler's untimely end. You're a lot tougher than you look."

"Ah, thank you, sir."

The major grinned a little. "In fact, I'm quite impressed with your actions. I've read the reports about you and I can see you're different from the other mech designers."

"If I may ask, how so, sir?"

Verle seemed to be in a strange mood this time. Ves could immediately tell that his valuation in the major's eyes had undergone a large improvement.

"You're smart like the others, but that isn't enough to survive on the streets of Neron City by yourself. Anyone else like that brat Pierce you hung out with recently would have probably soiled their pants and cried like a sissy! Without others to lean on, even a single random thug can shoot them dead. What's the use of intelligence in that case?"

"Mech designers aren't trained to survive under those circumstances." Ves replied simply. Though Major Verle seemed to compliment him, Ves didn't wish to belittle the value of his fellow colleagues. "Anyone would be hard-pressed after evacuating a disintegrating ship."

"Ah, but there's more to it than that." Verle spoke. "As I said, you're not one of those snotty nerds who can only act normal behind a terminal. You also know how to lead and take charge of complete strangers when needed."

"I have some experience with leading mech technicians. I also own my own company that's doing fairly well for themselves last I heard."

"The LMC." He nodded. "I never heard about it, but I hear it's on the rise back home. Not that I pay any attention to that in the first place. But that make you better than practically every other mech designer working with our mech regiment. You've got the guts to start your own company and fight for your own success."

"I had a lot of help with that."

"Help that you deserve. Not anyone can become the apprentice of one of those fancy Masters. You fought and competed against many other mech designers to grasp at an opportunity that very few can obtain."

Major Verle was definitely building up for something. Ves became a bit more cautious as the man uncharacteristically continued to praise his good points without mentioning any of his bad ones.

Ves decided to extend a probe. "I think your praise is a little misplaced. It's only through a series of coincidences that I've managed to accomplish a few things on Detemen IV. I also stumbled a few times and didn't strictly adhere to the rules of the mech regiment."

"Those are mere trifles." Verle waved his hand. "In the chaos of battle, anything is permitted. We call ourselves the Flagrant Vandals for a reason."

None of us are sticklers for rules. Many of us are sent to our mech regiment because we don't fit inside the neatly measured boxes the Mech Corps likes to put us in. Everyone among us has a skeleton in their closets somewhere."

This answer enlightened Ves a bit about the nature of the people he fought with for the past couple of months.

The Flagrant Vandals possessed their own pride and their own way of doing things. Their greatest challenge was to accommodate the diverse personalities of the servicemen sent in their way. Adhering too rigidly to rules would probably land more than half of the Vandals in the brig!

Perhaps this was why Ves hadn't been called out as of yet. Major Verle and his task force still needed to process all of their gains and losses from the operation at the Detemen System. The repair and recovery efforts alone demanded all of their attention.

Ves stared at the major and wondered what skeletons he hid in his own closet. For someone like him to reach the rank of major yet be relegated to the Vandals, something big must be weighing him down.

Verle pressed on after Ves fell silent. "Doubtlessly you are aware of Mr. Brandstad's current status. It's supremely unfortunate that he's missing. I enjoy a good rapport with him and I respect his capabilities like I respect yours. It's not surprising that he's Professor Velten's golden boy."

By now, Ves deduced why Verle wanted to meet with him. With the Vandal fleet split into two, the people who fell under the major's new task force had to fend for themselves. Ves quickly counted the mech designers attached to the task force and came to an unsettling conclusion.

"There are no other Journeymen in the task force."

"Precisely. For various reasons, the Wolf Mother remains with Colonel Lowenfield's fleet. Professor Velten and two of the Journeymen have also

remained aboard the factory ship. As for us, besides Mr. Brandstad, we saw no need in sending in another experienced mech designer."

The role of higher ranking mech designers did not feature very prominently in their planning. Even though they split their fleet assets fairly evenly, the Vandals kept most of their mech design prowess in the main fleet.

Alloc's uncertain whereabouts led to an unfortunate circumstance where the mech designers of Major Verle's task force turned into headless chickens. Without the reassuring presence of a prestigious Journeyman Mech Designer, the productivity of the other mech designers would certainly drop.

That is, unless Major Verle could find someone else to step in Alloc's shoes.

"Someone as clever as you should know what I am about to ask."

"You wish for me to become the head designer of your task force."

Good heavens. Only someone as prestigious as Professor Velten would fit that role. A Journeyman could do it in a pinch, but an Apprentice would never be able to garner their total obedience.

The low-ranking mech designers that worked alongside the mech technicians didn't know him at all. Whereas the high-ranking mech designers already witnessed his prowess, they envied him more than they respected him. Subduing them into obedient dogs without the requisite status couldn't be done in a single day.

Despite the obstacles in his way, Ves did not wish to let this opportunity to. He knew that if he passed this duty onto Pierce or any of the other Apprentices, then he would be forced to obey the will of someone who didn't know what he was doing.

Ves hated being subjected to someone else's control. Whenever he got the opportunity, he would rather opt to take over the reins and be responsible for

his own actions. That way, he wouldn't become doomed by someone else's screwups.

Naturally, the prerequisite of all of this was that he felt confident in his ability. Major Verle hadn't exaggerated too much in his praise.

"Sir, while I cannot promise you that I can match Mr. Brandstad's performance, I will do my best to fulfill my duty. What do my responsibilities entail?"

"For the full details, Professor Velten can fill you in through the military net. We are still in touch with Colonel Lowenfield's fleet, and as head designer, your privileges will be bumped to match those that are normally enjoyed by Journeymen." Major Verle explained. "In short, as head designer, you're the chief person responsible for the maintenance, repair, modification, configuration of all the mechs in our task force. You'll take part in any conference I call up and provide your input on how our mech composition must change according to our mission profiles."

"Those are very big shoes to fill." Ves replied honestly. "I may be a bit lacking in experience in taking care of so many matters."

Even though he raised a company worth billions of credits out of nothing, he freely delegated the matter of managing his organization to the retainers loaned by the Larkinson Estate. People like Jake and Chief Cyril had proven themselves invaluable in controlling an entire corporation with thousands of employees.

Maybe Major Verle noticed the reason of his apprehension. "You have to deal with your obligations regardless of whether you are confident or not. The galaxy will not wait until you sum up the courage to do your job. Besides, being a head designer is no different from any leadership position. The key is



to recognize capable people and fob off as much work you think they are capable of performing."

In other words, Ves should seek to delegate his responsibilities instead of performing them by himself. His eyes brightened a little when he realized that lesson.

"Thank you, sir. I shall take on my duties as a head designer without hesitation."

After that, the major passed him a data pad which held a few documents that confirmed his temporary elevation in writing. Reading the fine print, Ves would only take on the role for the duration of the task force's existence. Once the task force disbanded or another Journeyman aligned with the Vandals came along, Ves would have to relinquish all of his privileges and responsibilities.

After the change became official, Verle threw out another question. "Can you guess what we prize the most among our mech regiment?"

Ves threw a guess. "Loyalty?"

"That's a given, but that's not the word I have in mind. It's resourcefulness."

"Is it because we work under less than ideal circumstances?"

"Aye. Are you aware of our financial situation?"

"I've heard some stories, sir."

"It's truly as bad as you hear. We're cut off the Mech Corps and have to manage on our own. Many mech regiments would succumb under such circumstances. In fact, we almost became insolvent ourselves. Only after Colonel Lowenfield arrived did we take a turn for the better. We were already fairly resourceful back then, but the colonel taught us that we had a long way to go."

Ves had a feeling that Major Verle maintained a very different definition of resourcefulness than him. "Can you elaborate on what kind of resourcefulness you'd like to see from me?"

"Nothing different from what you've already shown." The major gestured to him. "While you display just enough intelligence, experience and initiative to substitute for Mr. Brandstad, there is one quality where you are more superior than him, and that's resourcefulness."

"Ah, but I'm still unclear on what kind of resourcefulness you are looking for. How should I discharge my duties?"

The mech officer leaned forward on the conference table. "What I'm interested in is getting things done. Putting it simply, when you face a difficulty, you don't give up or come crying to a more competent mech designer. Instead, you tackle it head on, and when you can't figure out a conventional solution, you aren't afraid to bend some rules and get things done through a different method."

Ves understood the major now. The Flagrant Vandals already worked under suboptimal circumstances compared to properly funded mech regiments. Now, they also got split up from the main fleet while they just completed a major operation. The task force had to work with less while doing more.

Someone who only thought in straight lines wasn't suitable for the job. To keep the mechs of the task force together, the head designer needed to be a go-getter whose head was filled with crooked lines.

Ves didn't know whether that was a good thing or bad thing.

#### Chapter 499 Head Designer

At the end of the meeting where Verle thrust a new job onto Ves, Iris clapped his back with her slender hand and smiled.

"I'm sure you're up to the task, Ves." The blond encouraged him. "No one else among the design team is as capable as you, whether we're talking about design prowess or leadership ability."

"How do you know that?" He asked, feeling a bit suspicious for some reason.

"I've seen how you work. When you're with the design teams, the work you do is head and shoulders above the other Apprentices. When you're working with the mech technicians, you have this air around you that compels them to listen to you. These instances alone prove Major Verle's point. There's no one better among the task force that can play the role that a head designer needs to perform."

Ves shook his head and rested it on his palm. "Not you too. Not that I appreciate the compliments, but you are putting an awful lot of faith in me. I barely know what a head designer is supposed to be doing."

"Then maybe you should ask the professor if she isn't calling you yet."

"Great idea. Can you tell me how it's done with the VRF?"

Iris furrowed her brows. "Not really. We do things differently. I can tell you outright that we aren't facing as much financial pressure. Sovvies and resources flow from our hands all the time in order to facilitate trade between the regional rebel movements. Instead, we grapple mostly with ensuring the loyalty of our external members."

Ves could see why the VRF struggled so much with such an issue. A rebel group as large as theirs probably hosted many different factions and sub-influences. Even if they outwardly stated that they fought to overthrow the Vesian system government, humans still possessed desires.

"Sounds like people management is a very big concern for your group. Since you mentioned external members, there should also be a more trusted class of members, right?"

"Yes, and they form the cadre of the Vesian Revolutionary Front. Some of them are even the descendants of the initial founders and revolutionaries of our group. Their loyalty to the cause is unassailable."

"What about those who enter into this circle later?"

"Oh, their loyalty is ironclad." Iris grinned in a self-confident manner. "There is no way they can become an internal member without proving their dedication. We may not be able to match our enemy's military prowess, but when it comes maintaining unity, the nobles can't compare to us."

Obviously, a rebel movement that continued to be a thorn in the side of the Vesian nobles for decades possessed quite a few means. Any other rebel group as large and prosperous as theirs would have fallen apart due to treachery and greed.

As Ves and Iris stepped out of the conference room, the guest designer freely revealed some of their inner workings.

"Overthrowing the feudal system is always a long-term effort in our eyes. The Kingdom has stood for hundreds of years and the institutional belief in the system is difficult to shape. Only by ceaselessly laying the groundwork and waiting for the right opportunities do we stand a chance at destroying the perverse system of inheriting the right to rule."

"You sound really passionate about it. Is everyone in the VRF like you?"

"Our most passionate recruits comes from those who are directly scorned by the nobles." She spoke with little mirth. "The Kingdom might look firm and cohesive to you Brighters, but inside our walls the cracks are many, if you know what to look for. Recruits are everywhere to be found, though we mostly let the local rebels have the first pick. Many times, the grievances only extend to a single baron or count rather than the aristocracy as a whole."

"Hm, back in the Republic, we're dealing with a similar sort of problem. I don't think we have as much rebel groups as the Kingdom, but the Bentheim Liberation Movement possesses enough strength to match multiple of your movements."

"We know." She nodded. "In fact, the BLM is one of our fixed trading partners. They supply us with goods that are cheaper and more readily available in your Republic."

That caused Ves to falter in his steps. "What?! The VRF's relationship with the BLM has grown to such an extent?!"

Iris suddenly realized that Ves might not be someone who harbored any sympathies for the Republic's rebels. "I apologize, Ves. I've said something insensitive."

Against her frail form and her big eyes, Ves couldn't hold it in him to resent her. "It's okay, it's just that the BLM are murderers and terrorists. They inflict a lot of suffering among the people who dwell in the Bentheim region. It's like they get off on how many innocent civilians they can blow up at once."

The pair fell into an awkward silence. With regards to the VRF, they should ordinarily be aligned to the legitimate government of the Bright Republic. Both of them wanted the Vesia Kingdom to fall. They only disagreed on the extent to which the Kingdom should change.

Yet the VRF apparently sought to forge a relationship with the BLM. This could easily turn bad against the Vesians. If the VRF facilitated BLM's campaigns, the most extreme outcome would insure that Rittersberg and Bentheim became two separate entities.

Once internal strife split the Bright Republic in half, the Vesia Kingdom would certainly pounce on them one by one.

Thus, leading to the end of Bentheim's reign as an independent state within a couple of months.

The BLM's success would not only weaken the Republic, it would also strengthen the Kingdom. The prestige of every noble would skyrocket when they won the war.

"The decision to work with the BLM is a high-level directive." Iris said. ""It can't be changed on a whim. Only when our highest leaders get together can a change in policy turn into reality."

"Even rebels have to face the terrors of bureaucracy."

"That's how it goes. As far as I'm concerned, we don't differ too much from the legitimate authorities. The only difference is that they have the benefit of the law, even if that's been twisted beyond recognition by a succession of nobles."

They finally reached a nondescript compartment that would be his next office. Ordinarily, the head designer resided on a logistics ship where most of the heavy lifting would be done.

Major Verle wanted Ves to remain aboard his flagship, though. Perhaps Verle wanted him close at hand, or perhaps he wanted to exert more control over his actions.

"So this is where I can find you when you're on duty." Iris commented as they explored the tiny and cramped office cabin. It was barely larger than his sleeping cabin, and contained nothing that could facilitate the work of a head designer.

In fact, the office was completely empty.

"Looks like the first thing I need to do is head down to the Shield of Hispania's workshop and fabricate my own furniture."

Iris crossed her arms and frowned at him. "Didn't you listen to Major Verle? Don't try to do everything yourself! Fabricating furniture is such a brain-dead job that any novice mech designer can do in their sleep. Heh, they can even leave the work to a mech technician."

"There's no other mech designer aboard the Shield of Hispania, and I feel bad about nagging the chief technician over something trivial. I'd rather just do it myself."

When Ves turned around and walked towards the exit, Iris stopped him with a hand against his front. Her palm pressed against the fabric of his standard green mech designer uniform, where she could faintly feel the contours of his chest.

"Ehm..."

She quickly withdrew her hand before the moment became too awkward.

"You're wrong. You're not the only mech designer on this ship. You still have me."

Ves blinked at Iris. He always regarded her as a visitor and a fellow peer. Even her origin as a Vesian began to fade in his consciousness once she assimilated in the design department.

"I'm not completely sure about that. You're a guest designer as far as I'm aware of."

"That's true. I answer to Professor Velten, but she's not here now, isn't she? I'm assigned to this task force as well, and while I'm not allowed to touch on the core secrets of the Vandals, I can still act as your assistant in many matters."

"I'll have to look up the relevant regulations and consult with Professor Velten before I'm sure of what I'm allowed to do."

She held up her palm. "Ah ah ah! Stop right there, Ves, or should I say Head Designer Larkinson."

"Technically, it's Temporary Head Designer Larkinson."

"As you say. The fact of the matter is that almost every mech of Major Verle's task force needs a lot of servicing, and you can't do it alone. Maybe you can call one of your buddies like Pierce to help you out, but he's more useful at his current posting than as your gopher."

"So you are volunteering as my gopher instead?"

"This has nothing to do with volunteering. This is about necessity. You want to put the best people in the most demanding position." Iris spoke and threw him a teasing smile. "As for me, even though I'm just a guest designer, I can still lighten some of your burden. Don't let idiotic regulations get in the way. Be resourceful and take me, sir."

Ves awkwardly coughed. For some reason, he felt this office grew a little stuffy. He felt as if he was being railroaded into this decision. That was not a good thing if he wanted to act as a leader.

Yet he couldn't deny her suggestion in her face. Not outright, at least. "Alright. For now, there's no harm in taking care of some of my matters. You can go ahead and furnish my office, but don't work on my terminal."

"Understood, Mr. Larkinson."

To her credit, Iris didn't contest that stipulation. Ves would be a fool to let a Vesian setup his computer terminal. She threw him a mock-salute before she hopped out of his empty office cabin.

Ves let out a huge breath in relief. Talking to Iris was like holding a rose. Even as she departed, Ves could still smell a whiff of her scent.

"Perfume is against regulations."



Not that any of the female Vandals adhered to that rule. Perhaps the message that Iris tried to convey had some merit.

Ves grew up among the Larkinsons for a time and visited them often to hear their tales. Throughout all their stories, the older Larkinsons stressed the importance of conducting themselves to the highest standard in the Mech Corps.

As a fairly renowned military dynasty in the Republic, the Larkinsons enjoyed a high reputation. That in turn meant that they would be subjected to a lot more scrutiny than usual. Every Larkinson in the Mech Corps had to be as straight-laced and faultless as they could be. The regulations existed for a reason, and every Larkinson needed to embody if not the letter, then at least the spirit of the rules.

"What a far cry the Flagrant Vandals are from those other mech regiments."

On one hand, Ves detested the sloppiness and corner-cutting that the lax enforcement fostered among the servicemen. On the other hand, Ves enjoyed the expanded autonomy. Now that circumstances thrust him in a position of actual authority, he finally felt somewhat free to determine his own course.

"This is what I always wanted. Even if I have to hand over this authority in a couple of months, the experience alone will add to my development as a mech designer."

It would also look good on his record. Once he proved his capabilities, another leadership position might fall into his lap in the future.

"I'm getting ahead of myself. My current job is difficult enough. Let's see what the professor had to say."

#### **Chapter 500 A New Beginning**

Before the task force moved on to the next step of their journey, the Flagrant Vandals paused for a very important matter.

Space burial.

While the operation at the Detemen System yielded much success, the Vandals paid a substantial price for their gains.

Not only did the bombardment of Heavensfall missiles strike down two combat carriers and damage a couple of other vessels, several mech pilots lost their lives in direct combat. The loss of life among the spaceborn mech pilots was fairly light, but over fifty precious landbound mech pilots never left the surface alive.

Ves recalled the last stand of Lord Javier as he slowly filed into the solemn hangar bay. The scion of House Imodris lashed out without mercy, often choosing to slay the pilots inside the Vandal mechs. Such ruthlessness happened frequently on the battlefield. Not every mech offered a path to escape for their cockpits.

Simply by knocking a mech down onto their back, that mech's ejection system became as useful as decoration. A cockpit simply couldn't drill into the ground.

The Flagrant Vandals recovered very few complete remains when they policed the battle sites. Beneath the immortal glory of mech combat, the road for victors was often paid with cruel deaths and unimaginable suffering.

This was why mech pilots deserved respect. Ever since humanity heralded the Age of Mechs, they managed to turn warfare from a conflict that sowed trillions of lives to a more manageable level. The primary combatant consisted of mech pilots, and they shouldered the most risk of death.

Even auxiliary regiments suffered less casualties overall, as they would only be involved in very few conflicts, and strictly in a defensive capacity. Against the might of mechs, they also tended to rout very easily or surrender after getting their morale crushed.

In contrast, mech pilots venerated courage and displays of valiance. A pack of timid mech pilots that ejected prematurely possessed no spine to hold their ground or push through difficult fronts. Such soft-hearted policies saved more lives in the short-term, but lead to drastically more defeats in the long term.

What was the point of war if one side constantly ceded important objectives over a desire to minimize casualties?

Sacrifices needed to be made, and mech pilots offered themselves up as the sacrificial lambs.

Mech pilots needed to acquire the judgement to eject at the right moment, but some simply pulled the lever too late.

It was not that mech pilots ejected too late, but by the time they recognized their dire situation, they already passed the point of no return.

Many casualties among the mech pilots tended to fall into this category. The men and women that fell in the line of duty all possessed the courage to match a hero.

Thus, the ceremony concerning space burials was one of the most important rituals held by the Vandals, or any mech regiment for that matter.

Practically every serviceman aboard the Shield of Hispania attended the ceremony. They filed into ranks with sombre burgundy uniforms. Banners in the same color hung from bots that floated high above their heads. They displayed emblems of notable battles and major events in the course of the mech regiment's existence.

Ves glanced at the ribbon-like banners hanging above and counted well-over thirty of them. That wasn't bad for a mech regiment founded less than a century ago.

Only major battles fought at the scale of several mech companies to an entire mech regiment counted among their ranks. The more prestigious mech regiments such as the 1st Volari Starhawks of the 4th Bentheim Division boasted as much banners as the leaves of a tree. When such frontline regiments showed off their banners, the public would spontaneously descend to their knees.

Behind each banner rested a story. Behind each story rested the souls of fallen warriors. Not just mech pilots, but also those who serviced their mechs or kept the ships running.

Over a hundred metal casks rested in front of the hangar bay doors. All of them were covered by cloths with the emblem of the 6th. Only a small number of them contained complete and presentable corpses. Others held only portions, while many more held nothing at all.

Several high-quality recorders transmitted the ceremony to the other ships, while projectors beamed the virtual bodies of the Vandals aboard the other ships. This way, almost everyone in the task force would be able to witness the occasion without leaving their ships empty and vulnerable.

Since tens of thousands of Vandals had to fit inside the hangar bay, the size of the projected servicemen was four times smaller. This led to a fairly unusual sight where hundreds of adults stood among tens of thousands of 'children'.

The lack of space in the hangar bay necessitated such a change. No one wanted to miss the space burial.

The time for the ceremony arrived. Major Verle stepped forward while holding the folded banner of the Detemen Operation. Everyone up close got a good look at the emblem, while those standing further back could look at the central projection above their heads.

The emblem consisted of two planets orbiting over twin stars. One star glowed red while the other glowed yellow. The planets didn't look like circles, but instead adopted complex shapes.

The symbol that stood for Detemen II resembled a rod-shaped crystal that glowed like the sun. It showed a lot of cracks.

The symbol for Detemen IV resembled a bleeding planet that was being bombarded by a trio of asteroids.

Once Major Verle reached a procession of guards, he handed over the banner to someone in a fancy uniform. The guard then proceeded to affix the banner onto a waiting bot and commanded it to fly the banner over the metal caskets.

A Vandal began to step forward as well and brought a trumpet to her lips. She started to play a solemn, lonesome tune.

The major stepped onto a small stage. "Men and women of the 6th Flagrant Vandals. It saddens me to see that there are less of you than before. I see a few new faces among you, but many older faces now rest in these lifeless coffins."

Several side projections appeared that displayed the portraits of the fallen. All of their faces looked dignified, as if they had already anticipated that they might one day be honored by a ceremony like this.

Some Vandals even broke out in silent tears as they gazed at the faces of lifelong friends and comrades that they always trusted to cover their backs.

In the meantime, Major Verle never stopped speaking.

"We are only human. Our mortality is our strongest nature. The drive to survive is the ultimate catalyst of our short-lived race. Through the revelry of combat, we experience ecstasy and fragility of life. Only in the heat of the moment do we touch upon a truth in the galaxy: water tastes the sweetest

when you are thirsty. For mech pilots like us, our thirst for battle can only be quenched by the flames of war."

Ves looked at the faces that scrolled by in the side projections. Alloc's name and face remained absent in the rotation, which caused him to relax for just a bit.

That did not mean that chances were high that Alloc managed to survive. His status was ambiguous, and would continue to be marked as such for several more years even if he never showed his face again.

Some part of Ves believed that Alloc deserved a place among the fallen. He hated himself for thinking that way, and suppressed the thought immediately.

"We call ourselves the Flagrant Vandals with pride. Do you know why? Because we laugh at the face of death! If the endless embrace of the unknown wishes to drag us in their depths, we will not cry in despair, but fight its grasp with smiles on our faces. That is what a Vandal ought to do!"

A thrum of pride and acceptance swept throughout the crowd. No matter if they attended with their real or projected bodies, everyone appeared to resonate with Major Verle's words. Even Ves became swept in the esprit de corps on display here.

For a moment, Ves felt as if he was an authentic member of the Flagrant Vandals. His back thrust a little straighter and his chest lifted a little higher.

"The stars belong to humanity, and humanity belongs to the stars. Our life begins and ends from the nutrients provided by the stars. So we shall send the vessels of our fallen to the star of this Vesian star system. I can find no greater honor than to be buried in the territory of our enemies. Is it not preferable to being buried in a boring system back home?!"

"No!" Everyone thundered in unison.

Ves visibly felt the vibration of the deck from so many people speaking at once!

"This is the way of the Flagrant Vandals! We cheat, we plunder, we steal from our enemies, even in death! No Vesian shall bar our way! If we are hungry, we take their food! If we're short on mechs, we steal their machines! If we need more spending money, we will take their hard-earned sovbies from their feeble hands!"

For some reason, everyone stamped their left foot in unison. The entire hangar bay rang from the echoes of that one single step. Only a handful of newcomers like Ves remained transfixed with both feet on the deck.

"The end of their lives is the beginning of the new one. No matter whether you believe in god, science or aliens, life is too precious to be snuffed out after a single lifetime. Let us send these coffins off to help our fallen comrades on their way to the next step of their journey."

A moment of silence fell shortly after. Major Verle and every other Vandal saluted the caskets of the fallen. It wasn't appropriate for mech designers like Ves and Iris to salute, so they simply stood in a stiffened posture.

The trumpet played on for a minute or so, but ended right after. At this moment, absolute silence fell upon the hangar bay. Besides the ambient noise from a ship that floated in space, Ves heard nothing else.

Ves did not feel any oppression or awkwardness in this silence. Everyone showed tribute to the fallen and turned their thoughts to what the deceased might face next now that their life in this universe came at an end.

To think of their departure as an ending sounded depressing. It was easier to accept that the lives of the comrades that they would never see again would be smiling as they reached the next stop of their lives. Perhaps one of two might even look back and wave at the Vandals gathered here today in unison.

Once two minutes had passed, another guard stepped up to Major Verle and presented a simple device to the officer. Verle inputted a code and pulled a small lever.

The entire hangar bay vibrated a little bit as the hangar bay doors slid open. A security screen was all that stood in the way between the interior of the hangar bay and total vacuum outside.

Of course, in the event of an accident, many other invisible safeguards would spring into action.

The caskets began to hover above the deck and slide through the security screen one by one. Miniature antigrav modules gave the caskets enough of a push to sling away from the Shield of Hispania.

They would slowly begin their trek towards the inner system. Their journey only ended when the star at the center of the system swallowed them up.

Some of these caskets faced a perilous journey. Perhaps a few errant asteroids or particles knocked them off-course along their journey. Accidents happened. That was part of life. A space burial didn't necessarily lead to the boundary of a star.

Once every casket floated away, the hangar bay doors slowly slid shut. Major Verle departed through a hatch and everyone started to relax and speak with each other in low tones. No one smiled, but those who cried felt no need to cry.

Ves thought his concept of life underwent a subtle sublimation. "The end of a life is a new beginning."