

### Chapter 191 Rage

Ves had a premonition that if he replied with the wrong question, he might not have his head on his shoulders anymore. A lot had happened that pushed Doctor Jutland to his breaking point. One more shove could send him over the edge.

He decided to come clean, if only a little bit. "I can work! I've been working on my mobility. Look, I can move again!"

He allocated a tenth of his focus on his Jutland organ. His energy cycle became lethargic, which relieved some of his pain and loss of control. Ves quickly demonstrated his competence by moving his fingers.

"This shouldn't be possible!" Jutland muttered as he stared at Ves dancing his fingers. "Your physique should still be adjusting to its changes."

Enthusiasm replaced his earlier rage. The speed in which he changed his mood astounded Ves. For fear of triggering him back to a fouler mood, he kept his mouth shut and tried not to resist the doctor's inspection.

"Hmm, this is exceedingly strange." The exobiologist mused and pulled out a rusty scanner from his lab coat. "But the readings don't lie! This phenomenon is exceedingly rare!"

Jutland practically slobbered over Ves as he poked and prodded his body. The man particularly paid attention to his internal energy cycle and noted how much it had diminished compared to its uncontrolled state.

"You shouldn't be able to exert any influence on your Jutland organ! Your regulator organ lacks the capacity to do so!"

Despite his discomfort, Ves mentally sighed in relief. At least he got rid of Jutland's impulse to wrench apart his neck. The doctor had proven to be highly unstable when things didn't go his way.

As the doctor dragged him back to his cot and brought out a number of machines to study his body, Ves tried to wait out the examination. All he had to do for now was to drag out the time while he waited for rescue.

Hopefully his help was on its way, because he did not enjoy Jutland's ministrations. The obsessive doctor started cackling as he injected Ves with several different solutions. The uncertainty of their purpose kept Ves from relaxing. Who knew if Jutland decided to kill him off on a whim?

In order to distract himself from all of these morbid thoughts, he tried to think about what happened to the expedition as a whole.

What concerned him the most was whether he'd still be able to leave this planet when the forty-day window came at an end. With the metallic storm on the surface of Groening IV starting to pick up again, the groundside forces had scant little time left to leave this exotic but exceedingly dangerous planet.

Without a fleet presence in orbit, they'd never get picked up. Still, Ves didn't entirely lose hope. A naval defeat rarely spelled the annihilation of all of the ships on the losing side. As long as the Ark Horizon herself retreated in good order, then the nucleus of the main fleet could still stage a comeback.

In addition, Ves could also rely on getting picked up by the Barracuda. His corvette might have been seconded to House Kaine, but the crew answered only to him. If Captain Silvestra could get his ship out of House Kaine's leash, then she'd certainly attempt a pickup.

Therefore, he still clung to hope. Even if the worst-case scenario happened, he still had a lifeline in the System. As long as he spent a couple of years pumping out designs, he'd be able to accumulate enough DP to purchase a long-range teleporter that could take him away without going through the murderous metallic storm clouds.

The doctor eventually left him alone and returned to his biolabs. The reprieve allowed Ves to relax and prepare for his escape attempt. Depending on the effectiveness of the diluted chemicals, the Kaius could still retain some of its functionality. Hopefully, the formula affected more than just the mechanical parts which mainly played a supporting role.

The hours dragged on as Ves quietly waited for change. Just as he dozed off, a tiny prickle against his palm interrupted his rest. Something metallic brushed against his hands. Ves carefully grasped the object and raised it to his face.

It turned out to be a tiny bot. His rescue party finally reached the cave. His heart started to pump faster as he grasped for hope.

The bot extended a secure cable which Ves attached to his comm. It established a secure, short-ranged comm channel.

[What is your current status? Are you in restraint?]

Ves typed in his reply.

[In captivity in a hut. There is no lock to the structure. I'm not restrained.

Jutland thinks I'm infirm due to the implants he installed in my body, but that's not true. I can move if needed.]

[Please detail Jutland's security arrangements.]

He emphasized that he only got a glimpse of what Jutland prepared. With his excellent memory, he noted all of the hexapods and their positions as well as describe the various makeshift structures in the cave. He pointed out that Jutland cared the most about the biolabs. He also warned his rescuers that Jutland had long exceeded the standards of a baseline human.

[Is he able to match blows with a mech?]

[I'm not sure about that, but he is very fast. You won't be able to stop him if he's determined to run away.]

[Your suggestions will be taken under advisement. The operation will begin as soon as we've verified your words and gathered more intelligence.]

The rescue party took extreme caution in their approach. After all, Doctor Jutland frequently defied expectations. Confronting him in one of his main hideouts would surely prompt him to reveal the trump cards he developed for many years now in preparation to confront the next expedition.

The bot shut down the channel and floated away after retracting its cable. Ves guessed that his rescuers intended to go through the entire cave from top to bottom.

Unfortunately, they underestimated Jutland's vigilance.

"What is this?! A bot? Mere rats seeking to gnaw my heels! Arise, my subjects!"

The hexapods that used to wander around like broken puppets turned savage. Even the little fellow next to Ves behaved as if someone snatched his dinner. The amount of threat the juvenile beast even intimidated Ves.

It proved that despite his extensive enhancement, he could never hold a candle to a real predator.

A lot of things happened in succession. Ves stopped pretending to be lame and landed on his feet. He ignored the growling hexapod and went to the entrance of his hut. As soon as he opened it, he witnessed a daring entrance from his rescue party.

It turned out that base camp pulled out the big guns. Half the hunting platoon spearheaded the charge. They pushed aside the hexapod adults and squashed the juveniles into paste. A handful of other mechs bearing the colors of George's Cavalry secured the entrance of the cave and took out the handful of hexapod adults in their wake.

"Doctor Jutland! This is Captain Kaine!" The Cathrec in the lead released from its loudspeakers. "We've got you cornered! We beat you once, and we can beat you again! Give it up!"

The doctor laughed maniacally as he raced towards the half-submerged Kaius. "Hahahaha! You've made a grave mistake in confronting me at my seat of power! Arise, my guards!"

The cave walls collapsed at certain points as several strange creatures emerged from their holes.

The beasts looked like worms but resembled hexapods with stubby limbs. Though they lost the use of their limbs, they made up for it with speed, toughness and an incredibly strong bite. Their ability to bore through the resilient cave walls alone showcased their strength.

The intervention of the hexaworms for lack of a better word stalled Captain Kaine's forces from apprehending Jutland. It took all they got just to fend off the danger.

Mechs that lacked flexibility such as the sole Ajax Olympian participating in the attack suffered grievously from the agile worms that nipped its heels. The Cathrec aborted its attempt to intercept Jutland and turned to save their only heavy mech from an early grave.

The doctor noticed Captain Kaine's movements and released a mocking laugh. "You call yourself a captain!? A sentimental sop like you is unfit to lead a mech unit!"

Once the doctor reached the Kaius, he stamped his foot on top of the dormant chimera mech. Its eyes glowed with menace as the massive mech roused from its slumber. The gigantic mech emerged from the pool with lumbering grace, ready to face its challenges.

As the Kaius slowly neared the entangled hunting platoon, Ves had already taken advantage of chaos by running off. The little hexapod juvenile in charge of keeping an eye on him squawked with indignation and ran after Ves like a prison guard attempting to stop a fleeing inmate. Ves didn't relish being bitten in the angry hexapod's deadly jaws and ran even harder.

A familiar mech entered the cave. The Stanislaw kicked aside a couple of juveniles and brandished its ballistic rifle towards Ves. Melkor's voice emerged from its speakers. "Get down Ves!"

Ves threw himself on the ground as the Stanislaw fired its rifle. The air above Ves wooshed awfully as he narrowly avoided being splattered by the bullet. The projectile travelled passed over Ves and tore apart the hexapod about to bite his rear.

The impact of the bullet against the solid cave floor pinged his ears and momentarily overwhelmed his focus. This inadvertently freed up his Jutland organ which unleashed its revenge at Ves for being suppressed.

While Ves tried to get himself together, Jutland finally noticed something amiss. As the Kaius slammed against the Olympian in a head-on charge, its internals started to release some distressing sounds. Jutland swiftly drew back the Kaius, only for it to stumble as it appeared to lose control of its limbs.

The madman adopted a befuddled expression on his face, but the hunting platoon already knew what to expect. Despite the intervention of the worms, the Cathrec's powered spear pierced through their near-invincible scales one by one. Once Kaine eliminated half of them, she left the remainder to her subordinates and proceeded to assist the Olympian.

Jutland hardly figured out why his pride and joy moved so jerkily. The Kaius suffered from so many ailments that it couldn't even balance itself on its legs despite having six of them.

It moved like a snail when it attempted to avoid the Cathrec's glowing white speartip, with predictable results. The powered spear punched through the scales that exceeded the protection of a heavy mech and wrought serious damage to the muscles underneath.

Sadly for the captain, her target's immense bulk brushed aside the piercing blow. Instead, the Kaius attempted to force its limbs into moving faster. It even darted forward to bite the Cathrec, but the highly advanced mech danced back well before its jaws came close.

By this time, Jutland figured something out. He sniffed the air a couple of times. His face slowly soured. "Sabotage!"

"It's you!" His eyes honed in on Ves who flopped helplessly on the ground. Jutland's stare somehow aggravated his impaired condition as his internal energy cycle shook erratically. "Even you betrayed me! After all I've done to strengthen your body, you would rather bite the hand that fed you! Perish then like the rest!"

Jutland ignored everything else and wordlessly directed the Kaius to storm over to Ves. The Olympian tried to stand in their way but Jutland retrieved his controller and activated his chimera mech's blue flame breath. Its jaws released much less flames from before, but they still posed such a threat that the pilot of the heavy mech instinctively dodged aside.

Only the Cathrec kept its cool. Captain Kaine circled her mech around and expertly attacked some of the weak points pointed out by Ves when he transmitted the schematics of the Kaius. While she inflicted serious damage, it took much more to cripple the huge mech.

When the flame breath sputtered off, Jutland pressed another button on his controller. The Kaius slowed down in its stride while its chest started to glow distressingly. The doctor finally unleashed one of its trump cards.

Ves was afraid of this. The schematics on the data chip hadn't included the strange growths inside the chest of the Kaius. Over the many days since he first got his hands of a recording of the interior, he continued to puzzle over its appearance and purpose.

The only thing he provided he transmitted to base camp when he got in touch with them with his transceiver was that it looked like an oversized human brain. The artificial brain took up a prominent place within the chest of the Kaius. It even enjoyed a direct connection to the chimera mech's augmented heat organ.

Now, a significant amount of power flowed from the heat organ to the strange oversized brain. Ves could even see its outline as the strange glow seemed capable of penetrating through all obstruction.

A grin appeared on Doctor Jutland's face. "I command you to stop!"

An invisible wave of psychic energy blasted outwards from the artificial brain. Every mech and every hexapod in the cave suddenly halted their actions. Some of the mechs even tipped over due to their precarious stances.

No one could move.

Ves got it worse than others. Jutland's words propagated through a vast and powerful psychic shockwave that burrowed straight into his mind and body. The strength of both turned against him, making it impossible for him to breathe or blink his eyes.

Worse, the phenomenon showed no signs of subsiding. Everyone turned into fish on the chopping block while Jutland loudly laughed at the turn of events.

"I have waited twenty-seven years to wreak my revenge! Unenlightened beings like you will never match be able to match my genius! Hahahaha!"



## Chapter 192 Culmination

Just as Jutland indulged in his triumph, the Cathrec suddenly beeped in alarm. Its limbs moved stiffly as its pilot failed to respond. "Detecting incapacitated pilot. Initiating contingency Gamma-One-Six. Autonomous control mode activated."

Some of the other mechs of the hunting platoon also started to move without any prompting from their pilots. From their awkward movements, Ves figured out that artificial intelligences had taken over their controls.

It was a brilliant countermeasure against Jutland's psychic attack. Ves remembered that no such backups existed in the designs of the Olympian. Chief Ramirez must have taken his warnings seriously!

"These primitive bots won't stop me." Jutland hissed and commanded the Kaius forward.

The smart intelligences that appropriated the mechs finished off the hexapods first. Jutland's indiscriminate mental command affected not only humans but also the native wildlife. The AI's conveniently cleaned them up before the Kaius lumbered over. Its extensive internal damage due to the corrosive chemicals Ves slipped inside the pool slowed down its gait, giving its opponents plenty of time.

The massacre didn't even affect the raging madman. He continued to push the Kaius onwards as if he helmed a spaceship about to crash into a moon. He disregarded every possible consequence as the AIs mastered the controls and formed to receive the charge.

The Kaius stopped in its tracks as its anemic charge failed to phase the prepared Olympian. The Volmars along with the Cathrec had long positioned themselves at the flanks. As medium mechs, they pounced on the briefly immobilized Kaius like a pack of raptors.

All of the AIs aimed at the weak points, as if they'd already been programmed with the relevant data. The Kaius truly buckled this time as some of its weakened metal parts buckled under the force.

However, a starved camel was still bigger than a horse. Even with all of its ailments, the Kaius continued to hit back with slow but powerful attacks. It even managed to pull off a difficult feint and struck a Volmar square in the chest.

This highlighted the faults of using AIs. They had obviously been implemented with haste, giving them very little time to master their respective mechs, let alone develop a smooth routine that took full advantage of the strengths of their machines.

Still, as bad as they currently performed, they rapidly learned their lessons. Their movements grew smoother over time, and they made less mistakes than in the first minute. The Kaius became increasingly hard-pressed to fend off their coordinated attacks.

If the hunting platoon fought against any other opponent, House Kaine would hesitate giving up control of the mechs to AIs.

Yet they lucked out this time because as much as Jutland excelled in exobiology, he lacked the expertise to counter the use of AIs. Any competent force employed hackers and cybersecurity specialists that punished any widespread use of bots and AIs.

Despite falling leeward, the doctor still urged his Kaius to fight on. Neither side yielded.

Now that the Kaius became preoccupied in its battle against the AI-controlled mechs, Ves gained a much-needed reprieve. Ever since his body became immobilized by the psychic attack, he started fighting back against the restriction keeping his mind and body imprisoned.

It helped that while the restriction covered much of his mind, it focused predominantly on his subconscious. Somehow, it hadn't managed to get a good grip of his conscious mind, allowing him to nibble at the edges of the restriction.

The more he freed up his conscious mind, the faster he got rid of his entanglement. He employed his newly freed up brain capacity to assisting his efforts to free his mind. Once Ves reached a tipping point, he outright broke his shackles, freeing his entire mind as well as his body in rapid succession.

He gulped in some air as he breathed in and out. His heart pumped with fury and his Jutland organ roiled as if it hated being stopped. Ves quickly devoted his full concentration on suppressing the rebellious organ. He didn't wish to lay down on the ground any moment longer.

A welcome arrival padded over to him then. Lucky greeted his owner with a relieved meow. As a purely mechanical creature, the psychic attack hadn't affected the gem cat at all.

"Lucky! It's good to see you again." Ves picked up the cat and affectionately hugged the pet. "I'm going to need your claws for something important. Let's go!"

He turned around and instead of running for the exit, he rushed towards the biolabs. While Ves cherished his life quite a lot, he also possessed a burning curiosity of what Jutland had been cooking in his labs. What if the doctor prepared something even worse than the psychic attack?

So with Lucky in tow, Ves reached the highly guarded lab area. Ves ignored frozen hexapods standing guard in front of the sturdy structures. He looked at the three structures and chose to begin with the smallest lab. With the help of Lucky's energy claws, they easily bypassed the lock.

"Damn, this is a dud."

The smallest lab primarily consisted of scavenged computing terminals and the like. Jutland must have performed most of his data analysis and number crunching in this room. The lab also contained a few rudimentary microscopes and the like. After a round of searching, Ves finally found a cooler stashed underneath a desk. When Ves opened it up, an entire rack of vials greeted his eyes.

Most of them carried coded labels that Ves had no way of figuring out. Without a guide, he couldn't figure out which ones were poisons or medicines. Whatever the case, Ves grabbed a nearby pole and resolutely smashed all of the vials.

A dangerous stink emerged from the cooler, so Ves only made sure he broke most of the vials before he quickly left the lab and shut the door.

"Let's go to the next one, Lucky."

After another swipe broke the lock to the lab next door, Ves entered it with trepidation.

"What the?!"

Unlike the first lab, this one contained actual specimens. Ves expected to encounter a genetically engineered monstrosity like the hexaworms. Instead, he came face to face with half-a-dozen incubated human bodies. They floated silently in their own transparent vats with many tubes and cables connected to their bodies.

The most frightening aspect about the bodies was that they looked identical to Doctor Jutland.

"That madman cloned himself!"

Worse, the clones consisted of human-hexapod hybrids. While the original Jutland still retained a semblance of human appearance, he hadn't

constrained himself when he developed his clones. All of them featured a different mix of typical hexapod traits such as claws or scales. One Jutland hybrid even adopted a complete reptilian head!

While the clones appeared dormant, given the amount of time Jutland had spent on their development, Ves took no chances. First, he turned off the power to the various machines that connected to the bodies. Then he requested Lucky to claw through the vats and destroy the brains of the monstrous clones.

It took a tense minute for Lucky to complete his task. While the human-like clones perished quickly enough, the ones with scales fended off his energy claws with alarming ease. Lucky had to sneak his claws through their mouths and penetrate their brains from the inside in order to finish the job.

Just as Ves and Lucky exited the middle lab and approached the largest lab, they finally got caught. Jutland bellowed with rage as he diverted his attention from the AI-controlled mechs.

"My labs! What have you done with my experiments!?"

Ves cursed Jutland's perception but continued to the final lab. This one had obviously been built to last, as its walls, doors and locks outclassed the other labs in thickness. Despite their robustness, Lucky only had to swipe a couple more times to destroy the sturdy lock.

"You rat! Get away from that lab!"

The doctor finally noticed Ves skulking about. He became so alarmed at the intrusion that he resolutely abandoned the fight and jumped from the Kaius. While the chimera mech continued to clash against the hunting platoon, the doctor himself employed his full might into closing the distance.

Naturally, Ves became scared at the approaching doom. Nevertheless, he opened the door of the lab and sneaked inside. Despite the risks, Ves wanted to see why Jutland cherished this lab.

He came across an unusual sight. Ves expected to encounter a formidable hexopod, or some other biological horror. Instead, he came across an incubation chamber which housed a single, resplendent flower in the center.

The flower resembled a white lotus flower in the middle of a pond. It rested quietly in the middle of an artificial pool that was constantly being fed with nutrients from a reconstructed dispenser. The size of the containers told him that the radiant flower had a voracious hunger for nutrients.

Where did it all go? Ves couldn't figure it out really, but one thing was for sure, the scent it gave off instinctively roused his appetite. His entire body screamed that if he were to eat this carefully cultivated flower, he'd receive an unimaginable amount of benefits.

"Time is running out!" Ves reminded himself while shaking his head.

Though he didn't know what purpose the flower served, with Jutland hot on his heels he had to make a swift decision. Would he listen to his body, which hungered for the flower, or his instincts, which warned him of the danger of eating a completely alien organism?

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained!"

In the end, Ves couldn't resist the temptation. The flower must be representing Jutland's hopes and dreams if he devoted so much effort on this magnificent flower that completely clashed with the local environment. Ves guessed that Jutland must have grown it from a seed he obtained elsewhere.

With Jutland breathing down his neck, Ves didn't hesitate any longer. Once Lucky swiped open the incubation chamber, Ves ignored the hot gasses

escaping the chamber and grabbed hold of the flower. His skin tingled as he brushed against the beautiful plant by its floating roots.

Ves stuffed the flower in his mouth while grabbing hold of Lucky. As soon as he completed his actions, he turned on his stealth augment. Ves disappeared from every kind of view just as Jutland smashed open the front of the lab.

As the lab door bounced beneath his feet, the maddened doctor beheld the damage Ves had wrought just seconds earlier. He gazed at the broken chamber as well as the dissipating gasses. His eyes took in every detail before focusing on the very center where a flower used to float.

In the meantime, Ves quietly sneaked way under the cover of his stealth module. He smoothly bypassed Jutland as he stumbled towards the broken incubation chamber and successfully exited the lab.

Once he passed the broken door, he picked up his pace, wanting to get as far away from Jutland as possible. The flower already started to disintegrate in his stomach, turning into a strange kind of energy that resembled the one cycling through his body but with much higher potency.

Despite the incredible amount of energy rolling in his stomach, the flower possessed an exceedingly gentle attribute. It was as if it had been made to be compatible for consumption.

"What is this energy?!"

After a couple of seconds of accumulation, the energy jumped straight past his internal energy cycle and reached his brain. The sudden influx of energy momentarily caused him to blank out. His body suddenly fell mid-stride, causing Lucky to meow in alarm. Fortunately, the stealth augment remained active.

While Ves dealt with the rash consequences of eating an alien growth, Jutland screamed with indescribable rage and blasted the entire lab to pieces with a single shock wave emanating from his primal body.

"RETURN MY HEAVENLY FLOWER YOU THIEF! THAT'S THE CULMINATION OF MORE THAN SEVENTY YEARS OF RESEARCH!"

Jutland continued to bellow his demands while overturning the entire surroundings. A distressing amount of heat escaped his body as he slowly spun out of control.

He completely disregarded his Kaius, which slowly succumbed under the increasingly competent teamwork of the AI-controlled mechs.

Captain Kaine even broke through the psychic shackles on her mind and body somehow. She took over from her awkward AI and brought her Cathrec to its full potential. The spear-wielding elite mech danced around the increasingly burdened Kaius while trying to dig through its scales in order to stop the giant glowing brain buried deep inside its chest.

While the battle turned against the so-called king of the jungle, Ves slowly recovered from his impulse action. He didn't know whether he made a mistake by eating the flower, but much of its energy suddenly flowed inside a hole inside his brain.

"Where did it go?"

Once the energy disappeared from his body, Ves regained control over his body. For a moment, he thought the energy would fry his brains into ash. Never did he expect to see it disappear like water flowing down the drain. His rudimentary inspection of his body revealed no other changes.

"I can't afford to dawdle any longer. I've got to go!"



Ves resumed his escape, passing by Melkor's immobilized Stanislaw as he neared the exit. After suffering from several delays, his stealth augment only lasted for another minute. Ves had to get out of Jutland's sight or he'd have a post-human madman going for his head!

"Damnit, what heavenly flower? All of that energy instantly flushed away into another dimension."

He guessed that the flower's potency ended up in one of the other dimensions besides the visible ones. Spacetime only consisted of the three dimensions of space along with time, but scientists have long determined the existence of additional dimensions, mostly through their interaction with exotics.

The flower must be an exceedingly precious growth nurtured with precious exotics then to possess its special characteristics. Ves therefore speculated that the flower was meant to nurture Jutland's supposed soul, but in actual fact it just dumped a huge load of energy inside a higher dimension that, as far as he knew, had nothing to do with the human body.

"Did I just throw away a priceless treasure into the trash?" He idly wondered. As long as Jutland didn't get his hands on a power-up, Ves had done his job.

### **Chapter 193 To Challenge a Mech**

The amount of energy Doctor Jutland released surpassed anything Ves had ever witnessed. His body even glowed red from the sheer amount of heat leaking from his pores. He definitely pulled out all the stops this time.

"I shall destroy you all!"

He went after the biggest target, the Olympian. By now, the venerable heavy mech endured a lot of abuse. Not only did it engage the Kaius in multiple engagements, it also had to deal with the consequences of running its systems at full tilt. Its overall performance already began to slide.

Jutland clearly didn't care. He just wanted to pound the biggest mech to pieces. While he obviously couldn't fly, his ability to run and leap reached superhuman levels.

Bang! He became so terrifying that when he slammed against the huge building-sized Olympian, the heavy knight actually stumbled back! A loud crunching sound accompanied the impact. Jutland actually wrenched away a couple of layers of armor!

"Is he challenging a mech with his body?" Ves wondered as he kept running away now that his body became unburdened. "This is impossible!"

Ves had never thought that he'd witness a phenomenon many people dreamed about. A human actually challenged a mech upfront! More than that, he actually held the advantage!

With his powerful body and his endless supply of energy, the crazy doctor exhibited both strength and speed. Jutland challenged everyone's perception on the primacy of mechs by boldly treating the Ajax Olympian as his punching bag.

After slamming his body against the shield for the sixth time, Jutland finally broke through all of its layers, causing the heavy object to splinter apart!

The AI that controlled the heavy knight reacted poorly to this, having never been programmed to fight against a human-sized monstrosity. It treated the loss of its shield as a prompt to go on the offensive, and proceeded to foolishly attempt to kick Jutland with its agonizingly slow foot.

"Insignificant worm! Get out of my way!" Jutland contemptuously growled with a deep, inhuman timbre. He drew his body inward before jumping straight at the center of the Olympian's chest!

Bang! The high-powered collision dented the Olympian's incredibly durable armor. Even the Kaius would be hard-pressed to do the same! Everyone

present genuinely feared for their lives. A man with the power to challenge mechs represented certain doom. If they didn't want to die, they had to do something about him!

"Stop it!" Captain Kaine yelled as her Cathrec ceased to cripple the largely immobilized Kaius and turned around to aid her beleaguered subordinate.

Her entry changed the dynamic of the battle. As an agile spear wielder, the Cathrec possessed just enough speed to keep up with Jutland's rapid movements. It helped that he merely possessed a lot of straight-line speed and couldn't easily change directions.

Whenever Jutland charged forward, the Cathrec brandished its powered spear in his path. Even maddened as he was now, he personally witnessed the weapon's power against the Kaius. The glowing white speartip tore straight through the chimera mech's scales! Thus, the doctor always veered away.

"Volmars! Constrain Doctor Jutland!"

Four of the Volmars ceased their assault on the Kaius and moved to reinforce the Cathrec. The remaining two Volmars along with the heavily damaged Olympian took over the duty of suppressing the extremely hardy Kaius.

Despite suffering a myriad of crippling blows, it still hadn't gone down. As long as the chimera mech kept its artificial brain alive, it continued to put pressure on everyone's mind.

Fortunately enough, the AIs controlling the Volmars observed the Olympian's reaction towards Jutland and learned plenty of lessons. Like the Cathrec, they refused to block with their frames, instead preferring to dodge Jutland's charges.

One of Jutland's major flaws was that he never tried to feint or take advantage of his incredibly speed and flexibility. The rage suffusing his mind had turned him into a half-coherent animal that only knew how to employ brute force.

In this case, the AIs used their superior processing speeds to analyse Jutland's movements and predict his vector before his legs completed their steps. The Volmars all avoided his attacks without fail!

Captain Kaine ordered all of the Volmars to surround and constrain the doctor.

While he didn't feel threatened by their maces and staffs, they still delivered quite a bit of damage if he got hit. His impregnable body didn't suffer a lot of damage, but the attacks were never meant to finish him off. Instead, they interrupted his rhythm and halted his high-speed movements.

Once Jutland bounced away from a solid staff strike, he didn't get the opportunity to recover. A massive white spear struck him from behind and tore through his spine! Its powered enhancement sheared through the doctor's body like a hot knife through butter and brutally dissected his torso from the stomach!

Time seemed to slow as Jutland fell in two pieces. As mighty as he appeared, even he couldn't survive without half his body.

When his upper body slammed against the cave floor, he gasped and vomited streams of blood. He gaped at the Cathrec, which slowly drew back its spotless white spear. His blood never even stained its tip.

His hand stretched forward, as if he wished to grasp the mech-sized spear in his hands, but eventually fell down as Jutland completely lost his strength.

Ves let out a sigh of relief. A man chose to challenge a mech this day. He failed.

"It's over."

Captain Kaine still had her scruples, however. Jutland spent so much effort on his body that he might be pretending. The Captain impulsively decided to finish the job, forgoing the possibility of capturing him alive and milking out his incredible wealth of knowledge and secrets.

The butt end of the Cathrec's spear landed upon his upper body several times, pounding his brain and all of his unique organs to mush. Once the madman's highly developed heat organ got hit, it instantly exploded. A huge wash of heat escaped the site of the impact, disintegrating Jutland's entire body as well as burning his lower body which had landed nearby.

Fortunately, not all of the energy released from the Jutland organ at once. It leaked out an unstable current of heat and other energies over several minutes like a deflating balloon.

The battle truly came at an end this time.

The Cathrec returned to the pitiful Kaius and efficiently pounded its limbs before cutting through its chest. After pricking the strange magnified brain, the psychic attack finally ended, allowing everyone to regain control over their bodies and mechs.

The hexapods also regained their faculties, but the mechs made quick work of the annoying beasts. Without Jutland's directions, the creatures devolved into primitive creatures that cared only for their own needs. Half of them fled the cave and disappeared into the jungle.

None of them even glanced at Ves who rested halfway towards the exit. His stealth augment ran out of power, but even so he didn't fear the beasts as Melkor stood guard over him. His Stanislaw shot any hexapod that neared their position.

Once the recovered mech pilots secured the perimeter, the Cathrec slowly approached Ves. Its cockpit opened, revealing Felicity Kaine in her piloting

suit. She floated down with the help of an integrated antigrav module and landed right in front of Ves.

"You're not looking so good, Mr. Larkinson."

"I've had better days."

The woman rested her arms on her hips while she regarded him through her helmeted head. "How is it you're able to survive in the open without a suit?"

"Doctor Jutland found it inconvenient to accommodate my baseline human body. Whatever he did to his own body, he partially applied to my own. I'm not fully human anymore."

Despite his gains, Ves genuinely sounded depressed. After all, the label of hybrid carried a certain stigma in human society. With so many alien species wishing to wipe out every human, no one dared to flaunt any obvious alien features.

"This is going to be trouble." Captain Kaine predicted.

The aftermath of the rescue attempt proceeded quickly. Once Captain Kaine sent back a mech to convey their victory, a horde of transports along with workers descended upon the cave.

Chief Ramirez led a crowd of mech technicians that looked over the heavily damaged Olympian and the Kaius. The former pretty much turned into a crippled machine, while the latter represented a bounty of exotic development.

The scrapping of the Olympian pretty much turned into a sideshow compared the herculean effort of trying to haul the crippled Kaius back to base camp.

A couple of exobiologists also arrived at the cave. While Jutland hinted that it merely represented one of many outposts, the presence of the research labs proved otherwise. This must surely be his principal hideout. The exobiologists

along with the help of other experts systematically dismantled and preserved Jutland's labs.

House Kaine made plentiful gains, to the point where Captain Kaine behaved like a cat who got the canary. She frequently rubbed her palms as she stared at immobile Kaius.

They not only recovered a unique chimera mech of immense power. They also recovered Jutland's damaged clones as well as reams of data, though Jutland encrypted all of it so it, so it would take years to decipher their contents.

As for Ves, his surprising transformation alarmed the exobiologists and the regular doctors. Doctor Mellow took charge of his health and urged the expedition members to send them back to base camp.

Thus, Ves got to return to a half-ruined base camp before the end of the day. The transport had to fight off several sporadic hexabat waves along the way, though their escorts expertly beat off the opportunistic wildlife.

"What happened here?" Ves asked from his floating medical bed.

Doctor Mellow insisted him to rest on the bed despite his protests that he was fine. She constantly studied the readings from the bed. She glanced at him with a distracted look.

"Once some of the mercenaries learned of the fleet's defeat, they responded with irrational violence. Keller's Blades instigated a violent mutiny that inflicted many casualties, especially when he tried to storm the communications center. Commander Tregis ordered the destruction of all of our quantum entanglement nodes."

That sounded especially bad. The quantum entanglement nodes represented the only form of contact between base camp and the rest of the galaxy.

Without it, they could never get in touch with Lord Kaine and the fleet, let alone anyone else.

Mellow guided his bed off the transport and into a treatment facility. Ves noticed that all of the rooms were occupied with wounded. To think that all of them suffered injuries from other humans instead of hexapods.

"Do you think it's possible we might be stuck on Groening IV after our forty-day window subsides?"

The exobiologist shrugged. "It's not my job to care about these matters. In my opinion, the mutineers acted prematurely and gave in to their despair in vain. As long as the storms hasn't blocked our way out, there's still a chance we can make it out."

Put in that way, the mercenaries indeed lashed out without proper consideration. Perhaps Commander Keller secretly fanned the flames and incited the more impulse mercenaries to take action.

Luckily, they failed, though House Kaine paid a grievous price. Doctor Mellow estimated that not more than a hundred mechs remained functional. Half of the base camp's defenses also got destroyed in the ensuing battle.

No one was in a mood to hunt for hexapods any longer. Commander Tregis allocated most of his core forces to guarding what remained of their base camp. As for the mercenaries that remained loyal, they had mostly been sent out in batches to guard over the extraction of the motherlode.

"How much wealth are we talking about here?"

Mellow pursed her lips. "It's not much of a secret, so there's no harm in telling you. The surveyors determined that the vein reaches about fifty meters below ground. The raw minerals contain lots of waste elements of little value, but the total amount of monoexurite you can expect after processing them should yield around seven kilograms."



Ves adopted a dumbfounded expression when he heard the ludicrous figure. That should be enough monoexurite to supply several CFA battle fleets!

"House Kaine has made it big!"

"That is only if they can recover it." Doctor Mellow retorted gently.

"Remember, all of that monoexurite will amount to nothing if we're unable to leave the planet. While Commander Tregis has promised me that House Kaine is working on the problem, he hasn't provided any details."

She had a very good point. Thinking about earning a windfall distracted Ves from the despairing fact that they probably couldn't expect to be picked up by the expeditionary fleet.

What transports and shuttles the base camp had at its disposal would only be able to bring a limited amount of men and cargo into orbit.

They were powerful, short-ranged craft meant to transfer cargo across planetary distances. They lacked the acceleration and fuel capacity to cross the star system so they couldn't even take refuge in the Groening System's other planets. More importantly, they didn't come with an expensive FTL drive, so they couldn't even limp back to civilized space.

"We're truly stuck." Ves concluded with a tone of finality.

### **Chapter 194 Trapped**

What struck Ves the most when Jutland made his last stand was that he completely became unhinged. His overwhelming rage at losing his flower pushed aside his devious intelligence and his admirable capacity for patience.

If Jutland hadn't lost his rationality, he still had a chance to turn the tides. In the end, he lost to himself. All of his plans came to nothing due to a lack of self-control.

Ves feared the same could happen to him. "So how's my brain, doc?"

"It appears to be fine, but that is only a preliminary assessment." Doctor Mellow replied as she put him through the latest barrage of scans. She already took extensive samples of his blood and tissue. She even cut a tiny portion off his Jutland and regulator organs. "It's too early to make a conclusion. Doctor Jutland's fascinating work have a myriad of wonderful effects. I can't even make sense of this new kind of energy!"

The exobiologist had never encountered this form of energy that could only be induced through special circumstances. It didn't show up on any existing scans and could only be perceived through the minute amount of heat it released as waste. This proved that it at least adhered to some of the rules that governed energy.

"So you can't figure out a way to make it less destructive?"

"No!" She resolutely shook her head. "We can't make any headway on this matter with the equipment we have on hand. It's better to focus on what we can do for now."

Over the next couple of days, Doctor Mellow along with some other specialists treated him like a patient and test subject depending on what struck their fancy.

At least with Lucky hanging around, they shouldn't be reckless enough to do anything radical like cutting him open and removing all of his organs.

The modifications made to his body represented something new to the scientists. They constantly learned something new every day, but even more remained out of reach.

"Doctor Jutland is a brilliant man, but he's also a paranoid man." Mellow explained when Ves asked if he figured out his changes. "Cyber specialists are still trying to crack his datachips but it will take years to open them up. Meanwhile, we aren't making much progress deciphering the functions of your

new organs either because Jutland has employed a form of biological encryption."

The doctors did the best they could to map out his various 'improvements'. They confirmed his suspicions that his flesh and bones had toughened up to an absurd level compared to an average human. The most remarkable aspect of Jutland's work was that he successfully transplanted the capacity to resist radiation damage from hexapods to humans.

"Not even the best gene therapy applied to the special forces of the Constance Grand Kingdom can match up to this level of enhancement!"

His respiration and digestion systems also gained a massive enhancement, though that didn't mean that Ves could eat icky stuff. He concerned himself the most about adapting back to normal human standards. Could he still breathe the same air and eat the same foods as he had always done?

"There is some loss of efficiency there, make no mistake about it. However, your Jutland organ sufficiently makes up the gaps in these areas."

In conclusion, Ves gained a remarkable boost in strength, endurance and adaptability in a wide variety of environment. He'd make for an ideal treasure hunter and pioneer with his new physique.

Still, that didn't mean Mellow grew confident enough to declare his body healthy. Jutland could have sneaked all kinds of hidden bombs and booby traps in his body, but the man's extreme level of paranoia made it difficult to figure out where they've been buried.

"There is one anomaly that you should be aware of." Mellow said as she handed over a scan of his brain to him. "Your central nervous system is influencing your regulator organ in a markedly concerning fashion. Usually, it's the other way around, as the regulator organ is designed to provide additional instructions that your regular brain is incapable of controlling."

The projection began to animate a model of what might happen. "As you can see, our models predict that your central nervous system will gradually merge with your regulator organ. What kind of effects this will result in is still to be determined, but whether they are positive or negative, we can still interrupt the process if you wish to do so."

Ves could hardly make a decision on his own. He truly lamented the limited facilities of the half-ruined base camp. A proper hospital or research institute would make a lot more progress on the mysteries of his body.

"From your words, I gather this shouldn't be happening. Could this merger be initiated by that strange 'heavenly flower'?"

While no other heavenly flowers existed, the expedition knew about its existence due to the various references Jutland had left behind. Ves eventually had to admit he ate a dubious alien growth.

Fortunately, Jutland intended to consume it himself, so it likely didn't come with any negative side effects. However, that only truly applied to Jutland's unique physique.

"The amount of resources Doctor Jutland spent on nurturing the heavenly flower is astounding. It also explains why the expedition has never met another apex hexapod. He preyed on them all and harvested their biomass to feed this flower."

While it sounded fairly concerning to them both that Ves ate a growth that contained a ridiculously high concentration of energy, they couldn't do anything about it. Unlike the rougher form of energy being cycled by his Jutland organ, the heavenly flower extraordinary energy stream truly escaped any form of control.

In the end, the doctors and specialists threw up their hands and declared him safe, for now. They hadn't found any acute threats that could kill him before

he returned to civilized space, that is if they would ever get picked up. The defeat of the expeditionary fleet still hung over the entire base like an omnipresent cloud of rain.

Once Ves got discharged from Doctor Mellow's care, he carried Lucky out of the treatment center and met with Ensign D'Amato.

The young and promising ensign looked a lot worse off this time as he lost his entire left arm. "D'Amato! What happened to you?"

"I suffered a laser burn that forced the doctors to discard the entire limb." He shrugged nonchalantly. "They're growing a replacement arm for me, but there are others in the waiting list who get to have their turn first."

Since D'Amato didn't show any concern, Ves put down his own. "So what is happening these days? Are we making any progress getting out of here?"

Right now, the groundside team suffered many losses but also made enormous gains. Both the motherlode and whatever Doctor Jutland left behind could be sold for a huge pile of credits back home. No one wanted to leave this wealth behind.

"You should know about the truth." D'Amato said and gestured Ves into an isolated office. "We've been sparing with the details before, but that was obviously a mistake. Some of our less stable employees who haven't been able to cope with their deployment to the surface have leaked what has happened to the mercs, who promptly lashed out and tried to take over the communications center. Do you know why they aimed for our quantum entanglement nodes?"

"I'm guessing they wanted to ask for rescue from anyone they can reach. They don't care about keeping the Groening System a secret anymore."

"That's true, but it's not their main goal. In truth, the expeditionary fleet came prepared to repulse the sandmen, which they did after expending a lot of

effort. What happened immediately afterwards brought the fleet into disarray. They were set upon by the Dragons of the Void who pounced on the exhausted fleet."

A chill went through his spine as Ves imagined the consequences. He was no expert in fleet engagements, but even he knew how difficult it would be for Lord Kaine to fend off a follow-up attack when he least suspected it. "How could the pirates have found our fleet?"

"We may never know." D'Amato replied with a grim face, which hinted at the possibility of traitors within the expedition. "What we can determine is that the Ark Horizon sustained heavy damage along with the vessels of our core partners. The Dragons of the Void aimed to behead the expedition in a single stroke, but the Ark Horizon proved to be more resilient than they thought."

The expeditionary fleet lost a lot of smaller ships as well as many mercenary transports. When it became obvious that they couldn't win the engagement, the expeditionary fleet dispersed in all directions, forcing the mysterious pirates to spread out and lose their advantage. The heavily-damaged Ark Horizon successfully slipped away in the end.

"Have the Dragons of the Void left to pursue the remnants of the expeditionary fleet?" Ves curiously asked.

"No. They spent some time salvaging the wrecks before making their way to the Groening System. In fact, the pirate fleet is currently orbiting over this planet. The only reason why they haven't made way to this underground region is that they can't find the entrance. The pirates don't appear to have any surveyors in their midst."

That sounded both good and bad. If they wanted to get off this planet before the storms began to rage anew, they could surrender to the Dragons of the Void. However, pirates weren't known to be merciful to their captives.

"I'm guessing the rebelling mercs tried to signal the coordinates to the entrance of this underground cavern."

"That's correct." The ensign grimaced while holding the stump of his arm.

"Make no mistake. House Kaine will never give in to pirates. Commander Tregis has promised to execute anyone who intends to do so."

"Even to the point of resigning ourselves to being stuck on this planet for twenty-seven years straight?"

D'Amato didn't reply to his question, but his face exhibited unflinching resolve. That proved that the core of the groundside team held out hope for an eventual rescue, if not now then perhaps a couple of decades later. They held firm to their loyalty to House Kaine and refused to hand over their bountiful harvest to the pirates.

"Who are the Dragons of the Void anyway? They've attacked the expeditionary fleet twice."

"We may never know their true origin. Even before we destroyed our quantum entanglement nodes, our investigation has turned up very little information."

Even the vast resources and manpower House Kaine had at its disposal couldn't penetrate the fog that surrounded these determined pirates. D'Amato believed that they definitely enjoyed support from a powerful backer.

"So what's the plan?" Ves tentatively asked. "Are we doing anything that can get us out of here?"

"Nothing that matters. We're busy wrapping up our operations on the surface and we'll be packing all of our valuables. We can't lose hope at this moment."

In other words, they had to pray to the heavens for deliverance. Besides surrendering to the pirates, nothing else on hand could surmount the

impossible problem of fleeing their grasp and transition out of the Groening System. The absence of FTL-capable ships alone halted any fanciful ideas.

"There's nothing else we can do but do our jobs and wait."

As the final ten days of their forty-day window loomed, Ves spent most of his time helping the maintenance department pack up their gear. They prioritized the recovery of their most valuable assets such as the Kaius, and planned to leave behind everything that wasn't valuable but took up a huge amount of space, such as the prefab structures and walls.

Ves half-suspected that they were only doing make work in order to distract the men and women from giving in to their despair. Did Commander Tregis truly hope for rescue or had he already resigned himself to an extensive stay on a hostile planet with limited resources?

The entire predicament showcased their helplessness in the face of losing the backing of their fleet. As much as the Age of Mechs revolved around groundside operations, the battle in space negated all of their efforts.

The situation changed at the thirty-seventh day. A new fleet entered the Groening System.

### **Chapter 195 Control**

"Is it ours?" Ves asked as he walked towards the inner base.

"It's doubtful." D'Amato replied as he tried to hurry up. His missing arm disrupted his coordination. "From what little sensors we still have in place that are transmitting back their readings, the fleet is several times larger than the expeditionary fleet at its height. None of the incoming ships are broadcasting any identifiers that we can recognize either."

Could there be a fourth party trying to ruin the third party's game? Or were the sandmen up to no good?



"It's not the sandmen, if that's what you're thinking. They're fairly distinctive even at a distance."

They entered a command center after the guards verified their identities. These days, his contributions extended Ves a lot of privileges including extended access of the base. He even got to meet Commander Tregis in person.

The man looked as if he'd aged a lot since the start of the expedition. Tregis wearily gestured Ves into his office. "Ah, I was just about to summon your presence. Please sit."

After Ves and D'Amato took a seat, he began to ask the first thing that came to his mind.. "What's the status of the pirates?"

Tregis gripped his fist. "They're getting close to finding out the entrance to the underground cavern. Even without a professional surveyor in their payroll, they're exploring and scanning the surface of Groening IV with numbers on their side. With the amount of processing power at their disposal, they'll discover the entrance at any moment now!"

The ground team faced a difficult situation then. If the recent arrivals turned out to be friendly, then the base camp merely had to wait out their arrival. If they proved hostile, then they had even less hope than before, because any friendly reinforcements would have to go through two enemy fleets.

Ves couldn't give up too soon. He held out hope that the incoming fleet would prove friendly. "How shall we fend off the pirates if they come? We don't have a lot of assets left. In addition, all of our mechs and mech pilots are worn out."

"According to the latest calculations, the unknown fleet is making good speed towards Groening IV. If the Dragons of the Void make a stand, then both fleets are projected to clash within twenty-two hours. A fleet engagement will

drag on for several hours, though, so we'll have to hold out for around thirty hours."

Thirty hours sounded a lot. With the arrival of an unknown element, the pirates must be accelerating their efforts at finding the entrance to the lush metallic jungle underneath the surface of the planet.

"We'll have to do our best to fortify our position then."

Tregis nodded. "Our miners have already finished extracting the motherlode, so we can fully concentrate our defenses here. However, that still leaves us with an exhausted force. In truth, I've assigned some men to employ a radical solution to increase our defenses."

"What is it?"

"Bringing back to Kaius online."

What? Ves widened his eyes as he heard the preposterous words coming from his mouth. "That's impossible! That mech is a badly-damaged enigma and we don't even know how it works!"

Ves thought that Chief Ramirez and his men were in the process of dismantling the huge chimera mech in order to make it easier to move.

The base commander didn't deny his assertions. "It's a longshot, but we should be prepared to employ every resource we have on hand. Our exobiologists and mech technicians are already at work trying to get the biological machine to work. They're still encountering problems with the control method. You should see if you can lend a hand."

After Ves received his assignment, he left the office, but not before he got his shield generator back. He'd been looking for the valuable life-saving device. Tregis told him that his men found it in a corner or something, but Ves knew

they probably tried to appropriate it for themselves only to get defeated by its highly advanced locks.

Once he stepped outside, he took a deep breath and sampled the local air. Ever since he got transformed, he didn't bother wearing a bulky hazard suit anymore. The things were nuisances as far as he was concerned, though he also drew a lot of weird looks. No other human could survive toxic atmosphere without a suit.

"It smells like death."

With D'Amato and Lucky in tow, Ves walked over to a beefed up workshop and received a very firm security check before being allowed entry.

The Kaius obviously received a lot of care. A combination of workers from multiple disciplines crawled over the dormant monster. They worked on both its mechanical and biological components.

Impressively enough, the workers made good headway with both. Replacing the worn-out alloy components with freshly fabricated ones required little brain power, though Ves found it regretful that they hadn't consulted him about it. After all, Jutland likely improvised the later additions, which caused the chimera mech to become increasingly burdened.

Still, that mattered little compared to the living components of the mech. A couple of exobiologists who Ves didn't recognize led a team of assistants in reviving and healing most of the damaged tissue. Compared to Doctor Jutland, they made a lot of progress by virtue of their collective intelligence and much better lab equipment.

"Come over, Ves." Ramirez called while he looked over the giant mech from a ramp. When Ves climbed the ramp, he once again got a good glimpse of the chimera mech's primal majesty. This was truly a mech that ruled over all. "The

commander wanted to keep you out of it, but we're running out of time. This mech is nothing but a hunk of junk if we can't figure out its control method."

Ves understood House Kaine's desire to monopolize the inner workings of the Kaius. The machine not only represented a unique fusion of the living and the mechanical, it also outperformed any other mech of its size.

"How did Doctor Jutland control the mech anyway? What kind of progress have you made?"

The maintenance chief shrugged his shoulders. "You'll have to ask the exobiologists for the specifics, but in short they found some creepy stuff inside the head of this big thing. It looked like a brain of a mech pilot that's been tortured into staying alive. Well, we ripped it off as fast as possible and started working together to rewire the Kaius into accepting the input of a standard cockpit."

When Ves looked over the schematic of their progress, he found that they made some significant changes to the Kaius. They stuffed a sturdy cockpit in the chest cavity that used to hold the giant psychic brain that Captain Kaine punctured at the end of Jutland's final stand. The mech technicians worked together with the exobiologists to allow the cockpit's neural interface to connect with the nervous system of the Kaius.

"I'll be honest with you." Ves said after studying the schematics. "I don't have a clue how the neural interface works. This is out of my area of expertise."

The Mech Trade Association posed very strict limits on the modification of a neural interface. It would be very easy to make the wrong decision that could end up frying a mech pilot's mind. Most mech designers opt to use a standard, off-the-shelf neural interface without any tweaks for that reason.

"No one else knows a thing either. Just take a look at it and see if you can knock it into place."

With time running out, the base camp needed every asset ready to defend against invaders. Commander Tregis put a lot of hope into the Kaius. The chimera mech was a king among melee-oriented mechs, possessing a perfect mix of speed, power and armor.

Ves first approached the chest area that had been opened up to make way for a cockpit. An exobiologist stood next to it wracking his mind on the problem.

"Hey, can you tell me what kind of issues you've encountered trying to get the neural interface to work?"

"It's complicated." The man replied, but explained the issue in a simple way.

"The Kaius is not just a machine. It's also a living being. The remarkable thing about this chimera mech is that it possesses its own subconscious that is able to decide whether to allow you to control it. Obviously, we're not Doctor Jutland, so it hasn't submitted to our control."

"The machine can think?" He already started to get a headache after hearing about the issue. This went way above anything he learned. Even though he founded the Living Mech Company, Ves never imagined working with actual living mechs.

"We've tried to coerce the subconscious mind with various methods, but the Kaius is an immense system derived from an apex hexapod. Nothing we have on hand can force it into surrender."

The exobiologists also tried to use a softer approach, but the subconsciousness ignored any entreaties. The thing behaved like an ancient dragon sleeping atop a mound of gold. Without being able to wake it, they had no opportunity of negotiating with it for its coins.

When he read through the logs and tallied their methods, he had to admit the exobiologists tried everything he could think about. Ves couldn't figure out another way except for... the X-Factor.

Ever since he joined the expedition, Ves resolutely sealed his abilities concerning this mysterious phenomenon. Working together with a crowd of mech technicians muddled up the mechs he designed and worked with, so the X-Factor never had a chance to break out of its shell.

Now though, he faced a mech that lived, in a way. If Ves was correct about the rules governing the X-Factor, then it had an intricate connection to life.

Could he communicate with a living mech through the X-Factor? Could he manipulate it in his favor? How would he go about it in the first place?

"Nothing ventured, nothing tried."

Ves ignored the exobiologist as he prattled on and approached the chimera mech's chest. He put his palm over its hardy scales and tried to connect with the beast. He expanded his mind and narrowed focus, tuning out every other distraction.

The sounds of mech technicians installing new parts and exobiologists treating damaged tissue faded out. Deep within his mind, a brilliant light ascended into the heavens and threatened to burn down in an unprecedented nova of destruction.

"Agh!" He painfully pulled out his mind from the dangerous illusion. Ves had a suspicion that if he let the image run its course, he'd blow out his brains.

"What is happening to me?"

Ves wasn't stupid. He associated the phenomenon with the disappeared energy from the heavenly flower. He faintly recognized its flavor.

The strange occurrence forced him to take a step back. He left the cockpit and sat down in a quiet corner while stroking Lucky's back. The cat had missed his presence and demanded a lot of attention since Ves returned from captivity.

"What do you think is going on, Lucky?"

The cat meowed ignorantly at him, caring more about his scratches than his owner's conundrums.

The dangerous vision in his mind scared him quite a bit. Would he be risking his mind every time he tried to focus his concentration? He carefully dipped his mind inwards.

Nothing happened.

He easily manipulated his thoughts into a mental blade that could cut through any errant thoughts floating in his head. Ves found that its potency had even increased. Was this another effect of the heavenly flower?

"I can't be sure of that. It could have grown from surviving the last few weeks. I know far too little about the mind to make any solid conclusions."

Ves avoided making assumptions and instead tried to determine the changes. It became even easier to form his focus into any shape he willed into existence.

He found it difficult to describe the process. It was as if he applied a giant net onto a cloud of myriad meanings. It ignored all the irrelevant meanings and only latched on to the concepts he wanted.

"It's even easier to shape the right image."

Ves imagined upgrading an ancient second-hand image projector with a premium-brand one. The resolution and vitality of his images received a substantial upgrade. Whether it could help him break through the impenetrable border between the System's C-rating and B-rating was another matter.

From his understanding of the X-Factor, it demanded more than brute force to break through that barrier. It required an evolution in his methods.

"It's still a benefit, though."

A more focused and intense image likely allowed him to impart more life in the same amount of time. He wouldn't have to spend months trying to saturate a design with his fingerprints.

He even guessed that once he became powerful enough, he could wipe off the fingerprints of others in a collaborative work.

"I don't even know if I reached that point."

He only brushed against the tip of the iceberg with both his physical and mental changes. Though they all appeared to be beneficial, the doctors warned him that they might take a turn for the worse. Only through extensive examination at a proper facility would Ves be able to uncover some of the hidden dangers buried within his body.

He laid his worries aside since he still had a job to do. Once he regained his composure, he approached the Kaius and touched it again. This time, Ves formed a mental probe of sorts and carefully tried to pry into the shell of the monstrous mech.

His mind encountered a thick, nebulous cloud. Ves thought he encountered some form of barrier that acted as a form of protection. He firmed up his mental probe a bit and dove deeper into the cloud.

The probe continued extending until the cloud suddenly reacted. Ves became alarmed when his instincts warned him of a major crisis. The roiling cloud turned hostile and bore down onto his probe.

The cloud established a connection to Ves.

It conveyed a sense of hostility.

Ves blanked out.

He woke up half an hour later, his entire body stained with sweat.

"What just happened?"



## Chapter 196 Outnumbered

No matter how much he tried, Ves couldn't recall what happened when his mind got sucked into the Kaius. It was as if conscious mind got pulled into the vast vortex of the chimera mech's subconscious.

Fortunately, most of the workers ignored his unmoving presence. They probably figured he was making calculations in his mind and didn't wish to interrupt his train of thought.

Ves departed the workshop with a flush on his cheeks and spent some time to freshen up. All the while, he mentally assessed his state of mind. Nothing appeared to have changed. He didn't get the sense that he lost anything, nor did he gain any boons from the encounter.

He simply lost half an hour of his time.

"I don't believe I wasted my time."

Something must have happened, his instincts told him. The uncertainty of what happened and whether it changed something in him gnawed at his nerves.

Lately, the more he dipped into metaphysics, the more he realized how unfathomable the unknown represented. Doctor Jutland's shenanigans alone amply demonstrated its potential as well as its dangers.

In order to be certain of his health, Ves returned to the treatment center and had himself checked. Predictably, they found nothing unusual, they did state that his regulator organ became increasingly enmeshed with his spine.

"It's a fascinating process." Doctor Mellow admiringly told him. "It's as if your body isn't content with these strange new additions and seeks to subsume them completely. Rarely have I witnessed such initiative without being prodded by an outside stimulus. From what I've learned of Jutland's research,

the regulator organ is supposed to stay self-contained in the event he wishes to update an older organ for a better-performing one."

"What about my Jutland organ?"

"There are no signs your body is merging it with anything else. It wouldn't make sense to do so since it serves a unique role."

Ves nodded in relief. "That's good to hear."

Despite the seemingly benign changes, Mellow cautioned him about the consequences of deviating from the human norm. "A different physique requires a different set of treatments. Standard medicines designed for baseline humans may react unpredictably when applied to cases such as yours. For example, a simple sleeping pill might make you drowsy for a second or put you in a coma. It's best to have a personal doctor on retainer who truly understands your body."

He'd consider such luxuries later. After thanking Doctor Mellow, Ves left the treatment center and returned to the workshop. The entire site buzzed with energy this time.

"Ves!" Chief Ramirez called. "I don't know how the scientists figured it out, but the Kaius is actually responding to the cockpit now!"

Ves looked with interest as the Kaius gently lifted a limb before lowering it again. It did so for all six of limbs, demonstrating the exact control the pilot in the cockpit had over the appropriated mech.

Did he unlock the Kaius somehow with his weird thirty-minute seance?

"Is the pilot reporting any issues connecting with the Kaius?" He asked, concerned about the mental health of whoever served as a guinea pig. "I imagine it's quite dangerous to interface with a half-living mech."

"There are doctors monitoring his condition. As soon as they detect something amiss, they'll pull the plug."

The Kaius turned into a docile machine, seemingly willing to let the mech pilot take the lead. The neural interface connected the pilot to the mech without encountering any hindrance this time, but Ves still had his misgivings. It didn't make much sense for the subconsciousness buried deep to give in so suddenly.

"Still, if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Ramirez muttered. "We only need to get it to work for a day at most. By that time it'll be clear if we're getting rescued or getting captured."

They spent the next couple of hours undoing all of the damage the Kaius suffered. While the exobiologists did an amazing job regenerating damaged tissue, the mech would never regain its full mobility. They had better luck plugging the gaps with machinery, though most of the times they went half-cocked due to lack of time.

Ves shook his head as he supervised the installation of additional laser cannons on the flanks of the Kaius. "Imagine certifying this beast. The MTA would hate this mech."

Their hasty modifications had rush job written all over it. Ves decided to add the laser cannons on a whim because the Kaius possessed an abundance of power. They hadn't even been properly calibrated. Furthermore, they only put in a standard targeting system designed for humanoid mechs for lack of anything better.

Ensign D'Amato shook his head. "It'll be a miracle if it can hit something beyond spitting distance."

"It's not meant to be a sharpshooter. The great thing about installing laser weapons onto the Kaius is that its heat organ acts as both an inexhaustable

power source while also functioning as the perfect heat sink. it will be able to devastate a whole company of mechs on its own with its laser cannons firing almost nonstop."

Frankly, the heat organ functioned as a massive cheat in this regard. Ordinarily, directed energy weapons had no place in the hunt for hexapods, so the groundside team only stocked a couple of lasers for contingency purposes. Their current crisis qualified as one.

After several hours of working, the pirate fleet in orbit finally made a move. An alarm alerted everyone to the threat.

Ensign D'Amato approached Ves. "Our monitoring system has detected many incoming transports. They're on track to enter the cavern entrance."

"How much time do we have left?"

"Two hours at most. It depends on how many mechs they've committed to the first wave. The incoming fleet is still fifteen hours away, so we only need to hold on for half a day before the pirates become preoccupied with bigger enemies."

Ves thought about the exhausted personnel and worn out equipment and figured they'd be hard-pressed to hold their ground. It wasn't impossible to hold for thirteen hours, but the pirates must be feeling the crunch as well and hoped to wrap it up quickly.

The mech technicians quickly finalized their current assignments and made sure that nothing stuck out from the Kaius. With the Olympians wrecked, the Kaius took over their role as the hunting platoon's bulwark.

When he looked over the mobilized mechs, he noticed the imbalance between melee mechs and ranged mechs. Against hexapods, such a deployment made sense.

"It's not as bad as it looks." D'Amato told him while they retreated to the inner base. As noncombatants, they played no role in the upcoming battle, especially when the ensign still waited for a new arm. "The Dragons of the Void are impatient for results. They can't run out the clock by sieging us from a distance. Once they commit their mechs to a full-on assault, our melee mechs will be able to hold the line."

They quietly waited until the first signs of danger emerged through the haze in the air.

"Are those aerial mechs?" Ves asked with an astounded voice.

Around two squads of flying mechs buzzed around the base. Their flight systems screamed as they strained to keep the fliers aloft. A couple of turrets fired projectiles at them but their speed and distance along with their ECM kept them out of harm's way.

To all accounts, the pirate mechs behaved as if they were playing with their food. The passes high in the air was meant to test their defenses while observing the base camp's exact layout. The low-level miasma forced them to fly a little closer, but in turn it also interfered with everyone's targeting systems.

In the meantime, half of the defenders looked on with anticipation.

"There they go!"

The native wildlife finally detected the delicious morsels darting in the air. Huge flocks of hexabats converged from far away as they honed in on the heat emitted by the mechs trying to fly under 1.4 times standard gravity.

The formation in the air fell apart as thousands of hexabats gnawed at their lightly armored frames. While their armor proved to be a little more resilient than those enjoyed by civilian transports, many of their surface components such as sensors and joints sustained a lot of damage.

Furthermore, the aerial mechs had mainly been configured as riflemen and harassers, so they lacked the melee options to throw off the hexabats. They shot their lasers and rifles as best they could, but even as they harvested hundreds of hexabats, thousands more flocked to their constant heat build-up.

The invading force suffered a heavy blow with the loss of all of their flight squadrons. Best of all, the defenders didn't even have to lift a finger.

Ves shook his head as he sympathised with the hapless pirate mechs. "I guess it's safe to say they haven't received any intelligence of what is going on here."

"The Dragons of the Void haven't received any transmissions from base camp." Ensign D'Amato nodded. "Our investigators suspect that one of our attached mercenary vessels left behind a dead drop whenever they transitioned into FTL. That left a trail of breadcrumbs right into the Groening System."

"Didn't you keep an eye on this kind of stuff?"

"We did, but evidently the traitors outsmarted us."

In any case, the fact that the pirates only gained some coordinates and nothing else meant that they came in blind. Their lack of knowledge concerning the habits of the hexapod life forms would come to bite them back several times.

Ves could already imagine the land-bound hexapods drawing to their heat emissions, though the expedition had already cleaned up most of the creatures in the vicinity.

The landbound pirate mechs took their time approaching the base, as constant hexapod harassment must have delayed their deployment. Still, they came with numbers on their side.

"How many mechs are out there?"

"Around a hundred so far, but they're definitely holding back."

The expedition could only scrape around seventy mechs that functioned well enough. They also fielded a handful of half-crippled mechs that couldn't do more than stand and shoot, even if they didn't possess the right configuration to handle ranged weaponry.

The numbers alone highlighted the precarious state of the groundside team. Without support from the main fleet and with depleted supplies, they lacked the depth to withstand an overwhelming assault.

To put it simply, their backs were on the wall.

"Can you lend me a gun?" Ves asked his escort.

"Why?"

"Just in case. If they come for me, I won't go down without a fight."

In fact, Ves had no intention of staying aboard a sinking ship. If the worst case scenario happened and the base had been breached, Ves intended to sneak away under stealth and survive in the wilderness with his adapted body.

However, he'd have to leave behind Melkor to do so. His cousin's Stanislaw had joined the defending mechs in huddling behind the walls, using them as cover to fire pot shots at the approaching pirate mechs.

Between the risk of getting captured and having his System robbed of his possession, Ves would rather give up his cousin. As a noncombatant, Ves lacked the means to change the course of the ensuing battle. No matter how much his body grew stronger, he could never match Doctor Jutland's display of strength.

The pirates swelled to around two-hundred mechs. At least they came without any additional assets such as infantry or artillery. Still, as kings of the battlefield, mechs alone operated well-enough on their own.

No one spoke a word. Everyone waited with baited breath for the pirates to make their move.

This time, the pirate mechs came in a dizzying array of colors and symbols. Like House Kaine, the Dragons of the Void enlisted other groups to fill up their ranks. The lack of unity among the pirates could serve as a weak point.

A brilliant-looking swordsman mech in black stepped forward. Its sleek black coating had been decorated with a pair of coiling red dragons. It wielded a slim but high-quality mech duelling sword that looked perfect for swift, aggressive strikes.

The loudspeakers of the elite mech bellowed out the terms of the pirate commander. "I am Jaded Serpent. In the name of the Dragons of the Void, I lay claim to your lives and your possessions! We have gained complete orbital supremacy. There will be no help coming for your rescue. I will only say this once. Shut off your mechs and lock down your turrets!"

Captain Kaine's Cathrec stepped up above the wall and faced Jaded Serpent's mech. She gave a simple reply to the pirate commander's demands. "Get lost!"

Her reply firmed up their resolve. Even Ves felt an irrational sense of pride at the thought of resisting the pirates with his comrades in the expedition. He held his borrowed laser pistol with a tightening grip, though he quickly regained his cool.

The dragon mech reacted swiftly to the course reply by stretching out its sword. "Commence the attack!"



## Chapter 197 Jaded Serpen

With the obligatory offer of surrender over with, the pirate mechs began their assault. They carefully pelted the star-shaped base walls from a single direction with lasers and shells.

It became clear that the quality of mechs and weapons used by the pirates adhered to the standard of a third-rate state. They matched relatively poorly against the better armed mechs of House Kaine and their mercenary partners from the Grey Willow Star Sector.

However, the local mercs enjoyed very little superiority in this regard as they obtained their mechs from similar sources.

The defenses held up better than Ves had thought. House Kaine hadn't skimped on the prefabricated walls that had been anchored into the hardy soil. As they were meant to withstand a horde of hexapods, they took little damage from kinetic and explosive projectiles.

Unfortunately, the alloys used in the construction of the walls fared a little worse against lasers. The pirates quickly wised up and started to concentrate their laser armament at a single spot, trying to carve a very large hole in the defenses.

The defenders gave it as good as they got, though only half of the mechs had been equipped with ranged weapons. The fixed emplacements picked up the slack. The turrets had been designed to take a beating and dish it out in turn, and they fired back with accurate volleys that chewed up the pirates in the forest.

The dense, hardy metallic forest provided some level of cover to the pirate mechs. The trees proves to be incredibly resilient, though they were too thin to cover a mech's entire frame.

Losses piled up on both sides as a low-intensity firefight extended for half an hour. The pirates slowly softened up the expedition's formidable fixed defenses. The walls and turrets couldn't move, so the pirates simply aimed to wear them down by focusing their fire.

Before the pirates committed to a full assault, they wanted to lay the groundwork first. The defenses bought valuable time to the groundside team with their sacrifices. Yet with every turret down, the pirates faced a little bit less pressure, allowing them to position their forces more aggressively.

In the meantime, the Kaius stayed hidden and out of sight. The partially repaired and improved chimera mech had no place in this long-ranged firefight. To maximize its impact, Commander Tregis ordered it to be revealed at the last possible moment.

The situation changed for the worse when missiles rained from above! They ended their arc flight paths straight into the interior of the base, focusing mostly on the mech workshops and other critical infrastructure.

The base only possessed a limited amount of anti-air emplacements that took out half of the incoming ordnance. The rest impacted against the workshops with debilitating explosions that deformed their roofs but didn't manage to break through.

Like the walls, the other prefab structures had been formed out of highly durable alloys that didn't lose out too much compared to those utilized in mechs.

Still, another volley of missiles arrived right after the first wave! Explosions continued to rain down in the same area of the base, weakening the targeted structures until their roofs finally collapsed. Distant screams emerged as some of the subsequent volleys killed and wounded mech technicians ready to service damaged mechs.

Ves could have been one of them. If not for the special dispensation he received from Tregis for being an integral part in killing Jutland, he'd be among the thick of it. "Don't we have any countermeasures?"

"Missiles aren't useful against the hexapod, so we left them out of the defense plan." D'Amato explained. "The base planners never took into account that we had to face a pirate invasion alone."

The missiles continued to wreak havoc while the mechs that launched them stayed far away. A couple of light mechs acted as relays that sent back targeting data for them to focus their missiles on. The Empyreans harassed them with their extremely powerful railguns, but they had little effect against the agile mechs.

"Something has to be done against those missiles!" Ves screamed over the din as the missiles started to drift over their direction. He imagined that the pirates brought plenty ordnance in order to force the base into a quick surrender.

Boom!

A large explosion set off in the distance. The volleys of missiles suddenly cut off. A couple of nearby officers cheered.

"That's the hunting platoon at work! They succeeded in sneaking up on their artillery!"

Ves looked around and noticed that the Cathrec had quietly disappeared from the walls. Captain Kaine must have brought the Volmars along to strike at the artillery mechs quickly before they could seek refuge from their guards.

The Cathrec and its fellow melee mechs returned triumphantly a half hour later. From the rumor mill, Ves heard that they not only took out the artillery mechs, but also destroyed some of their spare supplies.

"It's a pity their transports are tightly guarded. They're holding back a solid number of mechs to keep their escape route open."

The removal of the artillery mechs and the earlier mishap that had befallen the aerial mechs had taken out a lot of options for the pirates. They ran out of tricks to pressure the base except for a straight-on slugging match.

A normal commander would have pulled back and given up the fight. The losses far outweighed the gains, unless they heard an inkling of the windfall the expedition earned so far. So many kilograms of monoexurite made plenty of people see red.

In fact, Jaded Serpent even urged his mechs to intensify the attack. "Stop pussyfooting around! Get closer and disable all of the turrets! We won't be able to bypass the walls with them intact!"

As the champion of the pirates, his sleek black adorned with twin red dragons attracted a lot of fire. However, the pirate commander possessed a sly sense of evasion, managing to dart in and out of cover just in time to spoil the aim of the most heaviest guns arrayed against him. Sometimes his mech even dodged in a bewildering pattern that made Ves spin his eyes.

"That's the Roulette Spin! Not every advanced pilot knows how to perform that maneuver!"

The Roulette Spin could only be done with light and medium mechs focused on agility and flexibility. The mech half-spun into arcing paths that made it difficult to predict how far the mech moved and where it would orient itself next. It worked great against automated targeting systems and less skilled pilots, which happened to include most of the local mercs.

"That Jaded Serpent is a tough customer." An analyst remarked. "His mech can outmaneuver most of our melee mechs that focused more on brute force

than finesse. Even our Volmars would be hard-pressed to match blows against his mech."

The firefight faded out another hour later when most of the turrets facing the direction of the pirates got destroyed. The pirate mechs also burned a number of holes in the solid walls of the base, though it took an extreme amount of energy to accomplish such a feat. The pirate mechs finally drew back to their landing site in order to replenish their ammunition and energy.

"They'll be back soon." D'Amato noted with grim resignation. "Our base is not in good shape at the moment. It's going to get ugly once the knife-fighting starts."

With the temporary reprieve, the defending side took the opportunity to replenish their own mechs. Mech technicians also received some of the mechs that sustained damage, though the missile barrage destroyed most of their workshops. This forced them to perform rudimentary repairs in the field.

Ves wanted to join them, but he knew his contribution wouldn't matter much at this point. The more complex repair jobs required time and facilities that the defenders didn't have anymore.

Some of the mech pilots milling around looked agitated. Ves saw that quite a few bots and security personnel kept a very close eye on them. He imagined that some of the mercs would turn their coats in a heartbeat if they could.

As Ves had helped with the maintenance of some of those mechs, he knew the expedition also slipped in another safeguard. The mech technicians installed kill switches next to their control circuits that could instantly turn the mechs off if they received a special signal.

Such a function normally risked being exploited by their adversaries, but the trustworthiness of the local mercs left a lot to be desired, especially after some of them mutinied. House Kaine basically trusted in their technological

superiority over the pirates. So far, nothing has happened, to the pirates must not have brought any exceptional hackers.

The pirates returned some time later. This time, they brought a few knights with hefty tower shields to take the lead.

Jaded Serpent didn't waste any time. His dragon mech brandished its sword and extended it forward. "Charge!"

Well over a hundred different mechs charged forward at the same time. They maintained a fairly dispersed formation in order to avoid bumping into each other, but they also kept up with their assigned squads. Vast clusters of mechs converged around the numerous gaps in the walls with the shield bearers in front.

The defending mechs shot back with a vengeance, stopping some of the mechs in their tracks but not enough to make a difference. The ranged mechs finally received the order to fall back to the walls of the inner base. They fled the outer walls like rats jumping out of a leaking boat!

The defenders finally showed their teeth when their melee mechs met the incoming pirates. The shield bearers received special attention from the Cathrec. Its powered spear darted forward like a loosened arrow as it bypassed the shield and hit the bearers in the flank. Their armor easily parted against the special spear, allowing it to deal catastrophic damage with each single hit.

The pirates faltered for a moment as they witnessed Captain Kaine's prowess. Her mech truly outmatched most machines. No one wished to take a step forward into the jaws of death that her mech represented.

Until Jaded Serpent stepped forward with his swordsman mech. His sleek machine flourished its sword in preparation of a duel. "Your opponent is me!"

The other mechs made way for the two elite mechs and resumed their fighting at the other gaps. Every mech pilot adhered to the common convention of letting their leaders duel without interruption from others.

Of course, this could only be maintained if both sides possessed somewhat equal strength. While the Dragons of the Void brought much greater numbers to bear, the defending side had the edge in terms of quality and training. Neither side wanted to risk the consequences of doing something rash.

"Your name?"

"Captain Felicia Kaine of House Kaine."

"Ah yes, a direct scion of our visitors from the illustrious Constance Grand Kingdom." Jaded Serpent replied in a taunting tone. "You are far away from home, little miss. You will find no easy prey out here in the frontier."

"I can take on tough guys like you any day!"

The two mechs began to clash after that. Both pilots showcased the full capabilities of their mechs by dancing around their probing strikes.

The Cathrec had the advantage of reach. Captain Kaine extended her spear very far but darted back as soon as the dragon mech stepped closer.

The differences between the frames became clear after the first dozen clashes.

The dragon mech turned out to be a deviously designed machine. It possessed a lot of leg strength that allowed Jaded Serpent to leap in any direction at any time. It reminded Ves of the old Hoplite design he used as a basis for his popular Young Blood variant. The dragon mech possessed a very modern iteration of the system.

In turn, the Cathrec held a decisive edge in the quality of its weapon. When Jaded Serpent acted a bit too boldly, Captain Kaine traded blows by taking

the incoming sword chop with its shield while puncturing the dodging dragon mech in the side.

The powered spear almost encountered no obstruction when it dug into the dragon's mech armor. Jaded Serpent immediately pulled his mech backwards and assessed the damage.

"That spear! That's a Destroyer Weapon! How did you get your hands on such a treasure?!"

"I'm friends with the Terrans!" Captain Kaine brashly responded as she went on the offensive in earnest. "You'll be the first pirate scumbag I'll slay with this weapon!"

The dragon mech fell into leeward for a while as the Cathrec pressured it backwards with unrelenting spear thrusts. With his perception, Ves saw that Captain Kaine employed a precise, rhythmic pattern to her thrusts that unsettled Jaded Serpent.

"Enough! Dragon's Breath, deploy!" The pirate leader turned the tide by activating a special feature on his mech. Hidden flamethrowers popped open around various points of the dragon mech and spat out small jets of highly flammable liquids at the Cathrec.

Captain Kaine hadn't expected such a surprise. While the Cathrec managed to disperse half of the jets with its duelling shield, the other half encountered no obstruction. Her spear-wielding mech quickly became engulfed in flames.

"No!"

### **Chapter 198 Unstoppable**

Jaded Serpent's personal steed appeared to be a pure swordsman mech. Even Ves got fooled by its appearance and dazzling performance that he never expected it to pop up miniature flame spitters.



While the nefarious burning liquids stuck on the Cathrec, Captain Kaine quickly pulled back her mech and made a radical decision. She rolled the Cathrec onto the ground, managing to brush aside most of the flames in the process.

She proved her skill with that move. Her mech rolled across the ground for three revolutions without putting too much of the mech's weight onto anything that couldn't bear the momentary pressure.

Many lesser pilots failed to control their mechs as good as she did and broke the arms or even the heads of their mechs. The Cathrec's armor system gained a large amount of ugly burn marks on its surface. It showcased its lack of strength against heat damage, of which nobody on the expedition expected to face on the ground.

"You're mine now!" Jaded Serpent roared and drove his mech into a punishing offensive that forced the Cathrec into straits. The flurry of blows prevented the white mech from regaining its balance.

Ves wondered when Commander Tregis released the refurbished Kaius.

"Not yet." D'Amato said, shaking his head. "The pirates still have too much fight in them. The Kaius is best used when they run out of steam. The goal is to shatter the exhausted pirates into pieces so that they can't form an effective raiding force anymore."

Such a strategy required a lot of patience and sacrifice. Even now, many mercenary mechs started falling under the weight of numbers. Fortunately, most of their pilots managed to escape death by ejecting their cockpits.

Even as they fell, the defenders stopped the pirate mechs in their tracks. Half of the pirate mechs consisted of cheap frontline mechs with no heads and weapon barrels for arms. Their deficient armor made them sitting ducks for

the railgun wielding defenders, who took them out with two or three carefully aimed projectiles.

Ves noticed that the pirate mechs weren't using proper tactics. None of them adhered to the loose formation determined at the start and simply tried to swarm the damaged walls with fanatic glee. It reminded him of the first space battle between the expeditionary fleet and the harassing pirate fleet.

"The pilots of the pirate mechs look like they're drugged and brainwashed."

"It's difficult to scrounge willing cannon fodder. Pirates can be some of the biggest cowards in the galaxy. They value their lives above loyalty and brotherhood."

The Dragons of the Void certainly proved their ruthlessness by discarding so many lives and mechs. With the mech pilots fighting without regard for their lives, their ferocity steadily overpowered the beleaguered defenders even with their technological superiority.

In these fraught circumstances, one mercenary group took up the warbanner and fought back with twice the grit. As one of House Kaine's mercenary partners, Adila's Chosen had never really showed off their capabilities. Unlike George's Cavalry and the Stray Phantoms which often saw action, the religious group largely remained in reserve.

Their mechs consisted of sturdy medium mechs that might not be fast, but could take hit or two. They boldly wielded heavy flails that bashed aside the lighter mechs in a single blow.

Ves became impressed by the way they wielded the flails. The spiked alloy ball at the end of the chain always managed to pierce through a critical portion of the mech being struck.

The mechs of Adila's Chosen momentarily stabilized the faltering lines, though their impact proved limited as they couldn't cover the entire wall. The defenders didn't have much of a reserve besides the Chosen.

"Captain Kaine is still holding on!"

The Cathrec managed to bait its opponent. It parried the last sword strike of the dragon mech and thrust before Jaded Serpent fully recovered.

The spear glanced past one of the swordsman mech's thigh, piercing aside the armor plating with contemptuous ease before dealing shallow but effective internal damage. The dragon mech's mobility suffered a minor loss that proved extremely debilitating in the closely matched duel.

Captain Kaine's Destroyer Weapon showcased its full potential as she used it as a naked threat against Jaded Serpent's sword. The pirate commander clearly wished to avoid the dreaded spear and made sure to leave his sword away from the spear's path.

"How did she get her hands on a Destroyer Weapon?" Ves asked.

"Captain Kaine followed a training course in an institute affiliated with the Terrans." One of the idle scientists replied. "I heard she acquitted herself well enough to win some awards. The Destroyer Weapon is a custom design that's made for her mech."

"She's very lucky to gain such a renowned weapon."

"That she is. You can see how she's regaining the initiative. Even some flames can't stop her resolve."

Many people considered the Greater Terran United Confederation to be a stagnant first-rate superstate that clung to its old ways. They gradually let the New Rubarth Empire overtake them in terms of research and development.

The fairly recent invention of Destroyer Weapons put them back on the map. These special powered weapons used up a lot of energy, but converted almost all of that potential into a field that acted as a molecular disbonder.

Most materials became as fragile as paper when struck by a molecular disbonder. Even many kinds of compressed armor had to give way to the strange new technology.

The Destroyer Weapons quickly gained a reputation for being the ultimate melee weapons and dominated the Terran mech scene.

Unfortunately, the Terrans couldn't enjoy their moment of superiority for long. Their archrivals from the New Rubarth Empire came up with several special alloys that proved to be immune to the effects of a molecular disbonder.

Still, these alloys made use of extremely rare exotics that had only been found in the core regions of the galaxy. Out here in the galactic rim, many prospectors tried to find the valuable materials, but never encountered a trace of it so far. This turned the few Destroyer Weapons that made their way to frontier into the perfect tools to bully the local mechs.

Despite the Cathrec's valiant performance, the rest of the defenders slowly showed signs of breaking.

Even the flail-wielding mechs from Adila's Chosen became entangled when the pirates surrounded them from multiple directions. Their flails hit hard, but it took a lot of time to swing them. The pirates finally wised up and waited until the flails finished their swing before diving in to press the Chosen body-to-body.

Nevertheless, dealing with these strong and daunting mechs was never easy, as they inflicted a lot of damage with their bare hands. The Chosen dished out plenty of damage before they ejected.

"There's hardly any obstacles left!"

The casualties among the pirate mechs had become very tragic, but none of them flinched. The raiders only knew how to go forward and fight. All thoughts of stepping back or preserving their lives had disappeared in their drug-fueled frenzy.

Commander Tregis finally had enough. He couldn't wait any longer to send out his reserve. He ordered the release of their final trump card.

The Kaius stepped forth out of the gates of the inner wall with a mighty animalistic bellow. Its horn-like roar emboldened the defenders while throwing some of the most engaged pirates into a stupor.

Every pirate who caught sight of the Kaius became frightened by its size. The half-living mech made for an intimidating sight as it could tower over heavy mechs.

Even scarier was the fact that despite its bulk, it moved forward with unstoppable momentum. The mighty chimera mech marched closer with six of its limbs working in tandem.

Once it came close to one of the frailest points of the wall, the defenders pulled back and made way for the king of mechs. When some of the more reckless pirate mechs entered the gap in the walls, the Kaius responded by unleashing the laser cannons strapped to the sides of its torso.

An unending torrent of lasers erupted from the cannons. The pilot threw out almost every rule in the book by letting them pulse unendingly like a flickering light.

The sheer amount of power the laser cannons used up went far beyond the usual safety guidelines. A regular heavy mech would have melted all of the barrels by now, but not before sucking out all of its energy cells.

Yet the Kaius still continued to fire without any signs of faltering! All of the excess heat building up in the barrels never had a chance to overheat

anything as the augmented heat organ sucked away all of that delicious energy.

"This is the most impressive sight I've ever seen! This is the pinnacle of mechs!"

Even Ves underestimated the actual effectiveness of the improvised setup. The overconfident pirates lost almost a dozen mechs after a couple minutes of unrelenting laser fire. The befuddled pirates kept expecting the laser cannons to stop its self-destructing firing rate, but always ended up with molten mechs.

Once the pirates stopped invading the gap, the Kaius ceased its fire. While the laser cannons didn't have to be afraid of overheating, keeping them active all the time had other effects that quickly wore down the fragile weapons.

Instead of waiting for the pirates to muster up their courage, the Kaius decisively exited through the gap and charged towards the recovering pirate mechs. Its speed insured that none of the drugged-up pirates could muster a proper defense by the time the massive monster reached their midst.

The Kaius released another primal bellow as it practically ran over three mechs in close succession. Its massive weight flattened every mech that fell beneath its limbs into deformed pieces of scrap.

Meanwhile, the Captain Kaine took advantage of Jaded Serpent's retreat at the sight of the intimidating monster mech and raised her mech's spear.

"Onwards men! We are invincible!"

The mark of a good leader was their ability to inspire their subordinates. Ves thought that Captain Kaine lacked experience and largely reached her rank due to nepotism. It turned out that she had a keen sense of timing and broadcasted just enough words to rally the defenders.

Even though the Kaius only beat back a portion of the pirate force, its tall presence drew the eye of everyone in the field. The mech smashed its way

into the thick of the pirates and lashed out in each direction with its limbs and lasers. None of the mechs that stood in its way lasted more than a couple of blows.

Jaded Serpent finally shook off his amazement and brandished his sword towards the unstoppable beast. "Are you daft! Ranged mechs, fire on this monster! Melee mechs, pull back from here and resume our push at the flanks!"

Despite receiving clear orders, the pirate mechs strained to follow their new instructions. The defenders left the middle for the Kaius and redirected most of their numbers towards the flanks, meeting the pirate push head-on.

Meanwhile, the ranged mechs found their rifles and cannons to be completely ineffective against the virtually indestructible scales of the Kaius. As a mech based off the carcass of a hexapod king, its scales had reached a degree of toughness that could even glance off a couple of railgun projectiles.

The entry of this giant monster and its subsequent rampage completely quelled the momentum of the invaders. Even concentrated volleys of fire accomplished nothing more than disabling the laser cannons, which didn't hurt the core performance of the Kaius at all. With another triumphant roar, the Kaius raced forward on all six limbs and bounded across the field, reaching the rifle-wielding mechs in an instant.

With fast, powerful swipes, the Kaius tore the rifleman mechs into shreds. Their thinner armor and inferior speed branded them as dead mechs walking that awaited their final destruction at the hands of the indomitable monster mech.

As much as the pirates drew their courage from their drugs and brainwashing, they couldn't handle the terror-inducing killing spree of the Kaius. For some of

them, the shock tore apart their mental conditioning, which led to a third of the surviving pirate mechs to turn around and flee back to their transports.

"We broke them!"

"Run, you bastards!"

"Chase them to the ends of the universe!"

With the Kaius leading the charge, the more mobile defenders chased after the fleeing raiders and ran them down like dogs. Even Jaded Serpent gave up his attempts to corral his minions into reforming their ranks and joined the overall rout.

As the mechs ran out of sight, Ves let out a deep breath. "We survived."

#### Chapter 199 Reques

The Kaius and its entourage of defenders chased the pirate mechs for twenty minutes before giving up the chase. Continuing to chase the pirates all the way back to their transports risked falling into an ambush, so the defending mechs wisely broke off well before they overextended themselves.

"Great work!"

Everyone back in base cheered as the scouts reported that the surviving boarded their transports and lifted off. They completely gave up on the assault and cut their losses.

"Too bad we haven't caught that Jaded Serpent. We could have interrogated him about the goal of their senseless attacks."

Certainly, the Dragons of the Void sacrificed a lot of ships and mechs, only to receive nothing in return besides damaging House Kaine. Ves reasoned that stopping House Kaine and ruining their much-vaunted expedition must be one of their primary goals. In that regard, the mysterious pirate group achieved some successes, but not enough to make up for their losses.



Ves eventually scratched his head. "No regular pirate group will throw away so many assets for nothing."

"It's not their assets to begin with." D'Amato replied. "The Dragons of the Void obviously employed patsies to do the heavy lifting for them. Don't forget that each time the battle went south, they always ran away the fastest."

"Even so, borrowed or not, losing so many ships and mechs will hurt overall strength. They'll be much less capable of threatening their opponents after losing so much cannon fodder."

The most frightening aspect about the Dragons of the Void was that they managed to indoctrinate so many pirate outfits. Why haven't they received any backlash over their unscrupulous use of mind-altering drugs?

Ensign D'Amato smiled at him. "Pirates aren't the smartest people in the bunch. Smaller gangs of pirates have a lot of trouble finding safe harbor among the stars. My guess is that the Dragons are secretly controlling several pirate harbors. Whenever they're short on manpower, they'll kidnap some unsuspecting visitors."

Such a scheme highlighted the cutthroat circumstances of those who resorted to piracy. Perhaps some of the pirates had an inkling of what went on, but where else could they service their ships and mechs? These outlaws deserved no mercy for turning their backs on human solidarity.

Hours went by as the survivors picked up the pieces. Ves volunteered to help with the repairs of the Kaius. While it pretended to be invincible in front of the pirate mechs, it actually sustained severe damage to its mechanical components.

Due to a lack of time, the repair team focused on stabilizing its condition so it wouldn't fall apart in the short term. Many other mech technicians crawled

over the disabled mechs that had been strewn across the battlefield and assessed whether they could still be fixed.

When Ves looked at the battlefield strewn with so many wrecks, he couldn't help but count how much value lay on the ground. His salvager's eye came up with a figure that topped several billion bright credits.

The pirate mechs generally consisted of cheap mechs made out of cheap materials. The real treasure lay in the machines used by the forces from the Grey Willow Star Sector. These high-quality mechs employed valuable exotics throughout their frame that many manufacturers loved to use.

"Will we be able to recover all of this salvage?"

"Maybe not. It depends on if the incoming fleet is friendly enough. Now that they're getting nearer, we've received more detailed readings. The mass readings are highly alarming, though we've also detected the presence of the Ark Horizon."

For a time, the groundside team feared that their mothership had been captured. It took several suspenseful hours for them to receive a signal from Lord Jeremiah Kane himself. Commander Tregis decided to broadcast the transmission throughout the base.

The old man appeared aged and tired on the projector. "Fellow expedition members, it has been a trying time for you all. We departed from the Grey Willow Star Sector and crossed many light-years with the hope of reversing the fortunes of House Kaine. Enemies stalked us every step of the way, but despite their determined attempts to drag us down, we have persevered against all odds. Be proud of your accomplishments."

His words had a very emotional effect on the men and women employed directly by House Kaine. All of them possessed a strong sense of belonging to

the venerable noble house. The message resonated less with external consultants like Ves.

Lord Kaine spent the next couple of minutes explaining what happened after that. After the expeditionary fleet finished off the sandmen incursion, they suffered a devastating loss when the Dragons of the Void sprung their ambush. The bedraggled survivors fled far away until they eventually converged at a predetermined fallback point.

"Defeat can humble the best of men." Lord Kaine spoke evenly. "While I cannot change what has already happened, I can still change the outcome of this venture. Therefore, after much consideration, I've decided to approach the Common Fleet Alliance for assistance."

That explained the heavy fleet presence. Several destroyers along with a handful of frigates surrounded the Ark Horizon like an honor guard. Though the massive fleet carrier outmassed the smaller vessels, as dedicated warships they possessed unparalleled might.

The pirate fleet had no choice but to gamble on a quick win. As soon as they figured that they couldn't overrun the base camp with the mech forces at hand, they decided to cut their losses and run before the warships caught their scummy hides.

"It can't be cheap to enlist the aid of the CFA."

Ensign D'Amato nodded. "The CFA is humanity's common defense against pirates and aliens. While they won't shirk their duty, they never rescue fortune seekers knocking on their door without taking a cut."

Word came down from above what the price entailed. For the lowly price of guaranteeing the recovery of the groundside team, the CFA demanded eighty percent of all the expedition's mineral gains. House Kaine had to forfeit much of the motherlode they painstakingly recovered from the alien wilderness.

Furthermore, once the CFA received a summary of events on the ground, they also demanded the materials recovered from Doctor Jutland. This not only included the research materials and samples taken from his cave, but also the Kaius itself. In the face of their domineering demands, House Kaine could only act meekly and lower their heads.

Ves winced as he heard the sordid details. "Sounds like the CFA is the true winner of the expedition. They didn't even have to lift a finger to get their hands on all of that monoexurite."

"At least they left us with some crumbs. They could have demanded ninety-nine percent of all of our gains."

The expedition hauled in so many kilograms of monoexurite that everyone's eyes went green whenever they thought of it. Having to hand them over to their rescuers hurt a lot, but it was still better than being stranded forever on this strange and hostile planet.

As D'Amato remarked, the CFA left them with twenty percent of a massive fortune. This insured that House Kaine still earned a very generous profit even with all of their losses taken into account.

"The CFA left us with some crumbs because they want to keep the requests coming. If they gain a reputation for being too outrageous in their demands, people will turn elsewhere for rescue."

As the warships and the Ark Horizon slipped into orbit, a large number of transports and shuttles descended into the underground cavern. The abundant amount of heat emitted by the vessels attracted thousands of hexabats, but the well-prepared shuttlecraft peppered them with a vicious rain of projectiles.

The half-ruined base camp received the new arrivals with trepidation and relief. While a few officers from House Kaine arrived to assess the situation, most of the other transports belonged to the CFA.

Armed spacers departed from the shuttles and transports and locked down the entire base. They herded every worker and mech pilot into a waiting transport vessel as if they couldn't get rid of them fast enough.

"What about our mechs!?"

"We will recover your possessions later. Please enter the transports first."

Against the strong-arming of the CFA, no one could say a thing. They separated Ves from the rest once they found him. "Mr. Larkinson, your presence is requested aboard the science vessel the Ramulus in order to treat your condition."

Ves expected to be summoned by the CFA. Their clear interest in Doctor Jutland's research extended to the invasive procedures the madman performed on his body. As a living example of his work, the researchers attached to the CFA would never let him off.

"Can I have a word with my companions before I go?"

"Make it fast."

With that reprieve, Ves quickly turned around and slipped his comm around Lucky's collar before handing him to Melkor. "Take care of Lucky. Don't let him run around wherever he pleases."

His cousin nodded at him. "I'm familiar with his habits. I'll keep my eye on him."

Assured that his cat and his comm would be kept out of the CFA's clutches, Ves turned to D'Amato. "You've been a helpful watcher, ensign. I learned a lot from you over these months."

"Likewise. I've always been a ship fanatic, but your work has opened my eyes to the intricate world of mechs."

Both of them gained something from the other through their long interaction with each other. While Ves never appreciated his presence, the engineer-in-training never obstructed him when he worked. This alone deserved a commendation.

While Ves would have liked to say a few words to Chief Ramirez and Captain Kaine, the impatient CFA spacers firmly pushed him onto a fast shuttle.

Ves could instantly tell the shuttle was special. Ves had never seen one that had evidently been made out of compressed alloys. The sheer wealth put into this tiny craft showcased the organization's power and wealth.

Once they loaded the shuttle with recovered research data, the vehicle took off with rapid speed. Ves looked out the viewscreen and estimated the shuttle flew at least four times as fast as the ones used by House Kaine.

They emerged from the underground cavern and reach orbit a very short time later. The shuttle zipped through space and entered the hangar bay of a large and peculiar looking vessel studded with sensors.

When Ves emerged from the shuttle, he looked around and found the hangar bay to be empty. To be frank, what he saw didn't impress him as much as he thought.

The interior of the Ramulus had been built to withstand an extreme amount of punishment. Ves only recognized a couple of well-known compressed alloys. Despite the extravagant expenditure, the white interior looked fairly boring, as if the designer worked hard not to cheer up the crew.

Despite the plain appearance, Ves suspected that the ship hid a lot of highly advanced systems underneath the surface. He caught hints of it as a pair of

armed security officers guided him towards the labs. Every strange device prompted Ves to puzzle out their function.

Even more remarkable was when he passed by several uniformed spacers. Every crew member looked beautiful or handsome, which was a sign that they received expensive gene therapy. While not as heaven-defying as gene boosts, first-rate superstates applied gene therapy to all of their citizens to enhance their health and make them much less susceptible to diseases.

Ves had to curb his curiosity once they entered a quiet but extremely well-equipped lab. A handful of researchers awaited his arrival. The lead scientist stepped forward and shook his hand. "Welcome aboard the Ramulus, Mr. Larkinson. Ah, your skin is fascinating!"

The researchers hadn't even introduced themselves before they crowded over his body with medical scanners in their hand. They took preliminary readings of his conditions and discussed their findings among themselves.

"You'll be with us for a month, Mr. Larkinson. I suggest you make yourself comfortable aboard the Ramulus. We've prepared a complete examination that will allow us to get to the bottom of your new condition."

Hopefully the researchers didn't forget to treat his ailments. Their ravenous desire to get to the bottom of his changed physique unnerved Ves in a way that reminded him of Jutland.

At least his hosts were mindful enough to inform him that they didn't intend to keep him around forever. The CFA's contract with House Kaine included a clause that insured his safe return. Such an illustrious organization would never violate a contract that was already heavily in their favor.

They were the good guys, after all.

## Chapter 200 To Be Human

What did it mean to be human? Ves asked himself this question many times on the trip back to civilized space. The researchers avidly studying each and every corner of his body hummed with excitement as they unfolded the secrets buried within.

Ves had unquestionably departed from the standard of pure human. The trans-galactic organizations maintained a strict definition of what fell under the human race, and Ves happened to get kicked out of the playground.

In his daily life, Ves wouldn't be treated any differently. The Common Fleet Alliance's researchers revealed that certain levels of hybridization was a bit more common than usual in the upper echelons of society.

"We are at war with aliens, but we envy them as well. The most sophisticated races possess various wondrous powers that we secretly covet. It's therefore not a crime against humanity to depart from the norm, because we know we can't stop people experimenting on themselves."

The trans-galactic organizations discourage the practice, but allows it to happen as long as the recipients remain discrete. They did not wish to encourage a culture where the masses became accustomed to radical modifications.

"The reason why we are wary of fusing alien genes into the human genome is that it often goes very wrong. From all reports, Doctor Jutland is a perfect example of why it isn't a good idea to go too far. While we can't determine the exact causes of his mood swings, his tireless efforts to inject himself with the strength of these hexapods has turned him into beast as well."

"The twenty-seven year isolation also didn't help." Ves remarked. Personally, he wished that spending all those years alone pushed the doctor over the edge. In this case, Ves would likely keep his sanity then.



While the researchers never felt inclined to share their results to Ves, they at least informed him that his new organs came with only a couple of traps.

To eminent figures such as them who received some of the highest education in human society, Jutland's work appeared crude. Only the decades spent on mastering everything about the hexapods allowed him to form a working set of hybrid organs.

Fortunately, the researchers possessed enough benevolence to fix the hidden dangers in his body. Although Ves could only take their word for it, he did feel a tiny bit better after he went through a number of operations. The tiny undercurrent of unease he always felt through his developing Sixth Sense had faded out when he next woke up.

"We adjusted your genes to a stabler level than before." A doctor said when he checked on his waking body. "Your body is still fairly strong, but you'll get to live longer than fifty standard years now."

Like many humans, Ves would rather live longer than have an inhumanly strong body. Jutland thought otherwise, and look where that got him. A mech designer like Ves relied on his intellect to advance his career. At no point should he rely on his physical strength to make a living.

In total, Ves spent roughly a month aboard the Ramulus. The science vessel flew next to the damaged Ark Horizon. Both ships enjoyed the protection of the destroyers and frigates that escorted them to Mancroft Independent Harbor.

Once they reached the quiet little star system, Ves had finished his obligations. The expedition formally came at an end and House Kaine released the local mercenaries and consultants from their duties.

The CFA actually let him go, to his surprise. Didn't they want to study him further?

One of the researchers knew what he was thinking and laughed. "You are overstating your own importance to our research. We've taken many samples and we also scanned your body down to their elementary particles."

To his horror, they showed him a vat containing an exact clone of his body. Seeing a duplicate of himself in the flesh provoked a minor existential crisis within his mind. Who was the actual Ves? Perhaps the researchers lied and put the real Ves in the vat!

"As I said, you're thinking too much. Fully adult clones are always lacking in their humanity. Even if we copy a person to an even more precise level, their clones always lack that spark that proves they are alive. It's the main reason why clones have not proliferated in our society. The clones basically end up as human-form computers that are incapable of appreciating art, expressing their creativity or feeling love."

"I see." Ves replied, and quickly calmed down. Once he tested his thoughts, he became more certain that 'he' was the true Ves. "So as long as I can prove I can deal with concepts that AIs could never understand, I'll be certain that I'm human."

In any case, the researchers only cloned him so that they could study Jutland's work. Even if they desired to treat him like a lab rat, at least they'd be studying a gimped copy of himself. "Better the poor sap than me."

Ves tried hard not to think on what his clones had to endure throughout their short existence. In a legal sense, the clones lacked some of the traits that defined humanity, so no one bothered to give them any rights.

Once a shuttle finally delivered him to the Barracuda, Ves finally felt relief at regaining some form of control over his life. Lots of people kept an eye on him for one reason or another these past few months. Ves did not enjoy the limits it imposed on his freedom.

"Welcome aboard, sir." Captain Silvestra greeted him with a neat salute.

"We've already established a route back to Cloudy Curtain. We can depart the Mancroft System whenever you're ready."

"Has Melkor and the Stanislaw arrived on this ship?"

"They've arrived a couple of hours ago. We haven't packed up the Stanislaw in case we meet any threats. You might not be aware, but the shipping lanes throughout the Komodo Star Sector have deteriorated these past few months. Many interstellar vessels only travel in convoys at this point. It's too dangerous to set off on your own."

That sounded fairly bad, and not because they risked encountering a pirate attack. With the expert navigation of his new crew, he was reasonably confident the Barracuda could avoid and outrun any potential ambush.

No, the emergence of pirates meant that it became a lot harder to get access to critical materials Ves needed to build his mechs. At the very least, Ves expected a sharp rise in costs.

"Understood." Ves nodded as he tried to estimate the ripples of the changing times. "However, I intend to make a stop at Leemar before returning to the Bright Republic. Please set course to the Leemar System first."

The Barracuda was his ship to begin with, so he could do whatever he wanted. Right now, Ves wished to pay a visit to his master and ask for help in studying his condition. The CFA never really bothered keeping Ves up to date with all of the details, so he hoped to borrow Master Olson's influence in making sure they hadn't messed up his body.

In addition, Ves also planned to pay a visit to the Clifford Society's club house on Leemar II. He didn't forget why he signed on to the expedition in the first place.

"Four-hundred merits. I can buy almost anything with this much wealth."

Even a single merit held significant value, because they allowed members access to some of the restricted books in the libraries. Having several hundred merits all at once meant that if Ves so decided, he could hole up in the Moon Library pretty much forever.

"I can't really do that without leaving my Living Mech Corporation out to dry. It badly needs to expand its catalog of designs."

Ves always planned to pave the way for him to design an original mech. By shaking himself loose from the restrictions revolving around designing variants off other people's work, he'd save billions up-front and a few hundred-thousand credits more with each mech sale!

"At the very least, I'll have to hire a hacker to unlock the restriction on my recovered Dortmund printer. Then, I'll have to purchase a high-quality alloy compressor and chemical treatment machine."

The latter two machines allowed him to fabricate mechs for the premium segment. While they demanded a higher standard of quality, they also boasted much higher profit margins, which would be of great help in a time when the cost of resources kept going up.

Besides acquiring new machines, Ves also wanted to browse their library of component licenses. The Leemar Institute of Technology maintained a large network of mech designers and developers who both offered each other what they needed. He looked forward to see if he could pick up a bargain.

As the Barracuda prepared to transition into FTL, Ves first caught up with his subordinates. First, he inquired Captain Silvestra on what his corvette experienced during his stay on Groening IV.

"We stayed out of the fighting, if that's what you're concerned. We mainly acted as forward scouts that explored the star systems surrounding the Groening System in order to send back word of any incoming threats. When

the expeditionary fleet suffered a defeat, the Barracuda received orders to stay behind and maintain her post."

Nothing exciting happened to his ship, to his relief. "Did you get into trouble with the liaison sent by House Kaine?"

"No, sir. He kept to himself and behaved cordially among us women. Security Officer Sipos made sure he didn't get the opportunity to access any restricted systems."

"Good. Continue onwards to Leemar. I don't mind if you splurge on the fuel, just get me there quickly."

"It's not advisable to travel outside of a convoy, sir. I highly suggest you wait and join a well-protected group of trade vessels."

While she had a good point, she also boasted many times that his corvette could avoid and outrun any possible pirate ambushes. "I'm short on time and I really need to get to my destination quickly. Sticking to a convoy means that we'll be shackled to the slowest ship in the group."

The captain relented after Ves insisted. With that out of the way, he returned to his stateroom. Lucky lounged on his bed, but after he came in the cat jumped aside and greeted him with a rub.

"Hey there buddy. I've missed you too." Ves said and picked up his mechanical cat. "Have you produced a lot of gems yet?"

The cat meowed at him in an affirmative tone and padded over to a box filled with a couple of gems. Ves also found his comm among the jewels, which he quickly picked up and put over his wrist.

"I've missed you too, System."

After playing around with Lucky for a few minutes, Ves approached his desk and sat down behind his terminal. It had been a long time since he last

checked in on his business. The first person he called was Carlos, who appeared on the projector after a few seconds.

"Ves! You're back on the grid!"

"It's been rough out here, but I've survived." He replied with a smile. "Is the workshop still intact?"

"Nothing happened. It's business as usual around here. I've been churning out the silver label Mark II's for over three months."

Carlos laid out the numbers to him. He fabricated and delivered seventeen Mark II's, which largely adhered to the schedule Ves had laid out. Each Mark II sold for 28 million credits, but the cost of raw materials had also risen in recent times, so the average costs amount to around 19 million credits per mech.

After deducting some of his costs such as his mech broker's cut, the Living Mech Corporation earned an overall profit of 120 million credits. This was a generous sum of money, but Ves found it to be a little meager.

Added up with what he saved in his piggy bank as well as his family's investment, Ves had around 668 million credits at his disposal. Such a vast sum of money dried up very fast if he started shopping around some decent component licenses.

Ves nodded at Carlos while he continued to run the numbers in his mind.

"Continue on with your work. You did well with keeping up with a stable rate of production. Once I return, I'll make some changes to our working environment."

After Ves signed off, he leaned back in his chair and considered his financial situation. He possessed decent sum of money and merits, but not enough. If he wanted to fulfill his dream of designing an original mech, he had to acquire a lot more money at the very least.

"I've learned a lot from my recent trip, and my skills have matured a bit. I should make use of my improved capabilities."

While Ves could scrounge up some money by fabricating a handful of gold label mechs, their shrinking profit margins made it a thankless job. Ves had no enthusiasm of relegating himself to a full-time fabricator.

What he really needed was to fabricate a high-margin product like his planned-for but never-seen ruby label product line. It was time for him to call Marcella and see whether she could find a client for him that was willing to spend a lot of credits.