

Chapter 281: Convergence

Thousands, if not tens of thousands of ships converged upon the Glowing Planet. Much of them consisted of cheap converted transports, but some of them boasted enough tonnage to overrun a small planet in a day.

The Glowing Planet's fate was sealed as soon as the trade convoy led by the Calcardon had stumbled upon it. Even if every crew member aboard every ship swore an oath of silence, word of the miraculous planet's existence would have still been leaked.

Now, a horde of locusts descended upon its virgin lands, the trade convoy first among them. Driven by rapacious greed, all of the haulers and mercenary carriers ignored their contractual obligations in favor of descended upon the planet.

Even if they lacked the specialized mining equipment to get at the most valuable ores, they still thought they could get their hands on some valuable chunks.

"Even if we can't find any rocks, we can still use the weapons equipped on our mechs!"

The hasty approach didn't end well for them. They underestimated the anomalies such active planets induced upon their environments. Even their orbits suffered from its chaotic wrath.

It took only a single day for the Calcardon to fall. Her hull stretched to pieces as she suddenly fell into a swirling tide of gravitic pressure. None of her crew and mechs survived.

Some of the other vessels in the former trade convoy could have pulled away from the planet, if not leave its vicinity altogether. Yet in their haste to harvest the Glowing Planet's treasures, they ignored the Calcardon's fate and dismissed the incident as a low-probability occurrence.

"The Barbed Lynxes had it coming. There's no way the same thing will happen to us!"

They vastly underestimated the hazards.

By the second day, no more ships remained in orbit. Random spasms in the fabric of reality had rent most of them apart across time and space. Some pieces of debris had even crossed back into time, not that it mattered since they largely floated in the humongous void of interstellar space.

Meanwhile, the Glowing Planet continued to drift away in space. Soon its journey would bring it outside the borders of the Republic. At least, that would have happened if humanity hadn't gotten word of its existence.

Aboard the flagship of the Blood Claws, Raella relentlessly trained her physical body in preparation for the hard slog ahead. She had locked herself inside a hard light simulation cage, which presented a variety of projected thugs and beasts for her to dance around and knock them out with her arms and legs. She dexterously weaved between the savage imitations of life and dismantled them with ruthless efficiency.

Once the simulation ended, she exited the cage while letting a bot wipe away her sweat and freshen up her body. "Wooh! I broke my record!"

"Great job!" Dietrich said from the side. He already finished his daily marksmanship training. "Let's go eat some chow."

They walked over to the mess hall a few decks above the massive fleet carrier. Unlike Walter's Whalers, the Blood Claws knew how to keep their ship running. Hardly any spec of dust marred its gleaming corridors. That might soon change once the campaign heated up, but for now, the Blood Claws looked prime and ready to go to war.

Once they sat down at a table, a pair of bots automatically delivered a meal tailored to their tastes and their bodily needs. Raella eagerly grabbed her drink and gulped down half of it in an instant.

"I've been talking with Ves a few times. He's eager to meet you again once we make landfall."

Raella pressed her lips. "It's touching to hear he cares, but he didn't need to travel all the way here. He should have stayed back on your miserable little farm planet."

"Hey! Cloudy Curtain isn't bad once you get to appreciate its charm!"

"Whatever you say, farm boy."

They paused their discussion to eat. Both had become famished after finishing their training. The food easily slipped down their throats as they devoured their meals.

"You know, it's not going to be easy to survive down there." Dietrich started up again. "I've been hearing some news that the anomalies around the planet has already claimed the lives of an entire trade convoy. If it's already so bad up in orbit, it's surely going to be worse on the surface."

"Even if that's true, the Blood Claws or the Mech Corps will figure something out. They're not going to let a bunch of unruly special effects ruin the harvest of the century."

Dietrich hoped the people upstairs remained clueless. As long as they didn't figure out an answer to tackle the anomalies, Raella wouldn't get the opportunity to descend with the rest of the Blood Claws.

He discreetly shook his head. Since when did he care so much about a girl? He had plenty of flings in the past. Why did Raella catch his heart?

As he stared intently at she tackled her dessert, he figured he became attracted to her strength. A dump like Cloudy Curtain couldn't have produced a woman so skilled at piloting mechs.

Dietrich loved her exuberance, but did Raella love him back? Perhaps she treated him like he treated his former flings. It didn't help that her abrupt decision to join this expedition had introduced some friction in their relationship.

"Babe, I won't argue about your desire to make landfall. I know how much you crave action. Just let me be with you. I'll back you up as best I can."

"Awww, you're so sweet, Dietrich!" Raella laughed. "All of the boys at Rittersberg would have been too busy turning up their noses at the sky to think about protecting me. But really, I don't need your coddling. I can handle myself, no matter what the Glowing Planet throws at us."

"It's not the Glowing Planet I'm afraid of. Well, that's not true. I am afraid of it, but I'm more scared about the riff raff that will arrive in the next couple of days."

"I'm sure we'll be able to clean them all up. Trash will be trash. I've dealt with several of them when I fought in the underground arenas."

Dietrich grabbed her hands and clasped them in his own. "I still worry about you. All the real opponents you've faced so far are rejects compared to the pilots who joined the military."

"I know how good they are. I'm a Larkinson, remember? Even if they can kick my butt, I'll make sure to kick theirs in return, just like what Melinda did to Captain Vicar."

Her tone betrayed a hint of envy. Why did Melinda get to show off the Blackbeak in a crowded arena? That should have been Raella! Even if she didn't specialize in piloting mechs, she still would have managed to deal with the pressure.

In a way, she craved to prove her courage, to test whether she had what it took to be a Larkinson. She couldn't wait for the war to erupt and she didn't think she'd see any action anyway if she kept patrolling some stupid workshop.

The Blood Claws presented an opportunity for her to make her mark. Her biggest aim was to distinguish herself in battle.

While Raella dreamt about overshadowing Melinda, plenty of other people aspired to fulfill their goals in the upcoming campaign.

Over a third of the Bright Republic's mercenary corps had converged around a small number of charismatic mercenary leaders. While no single mercenary corps possessed the numbers to defend themselves against a major power, the balance of power changed if they managed to unite.

The emergence of the so-called mercenary lords allowed the smaller outfits to band together to form a temporary alliance. While none of them really trusted their colleagues to risk their lives for a couple of strangers, they still shared enough in common to let a lord order them around.

Of course, that only held if they got paid. An alliance would instantly disintegrate if the lord became incapable of delivering the goods.

Thus, the leaders faced a lot of pressure to succeed in their expeditions. They'd be ruined if they left with empty hands. The mercenaries that tentatively answered their calls could easily turn against the lords if they showed an inkling of weakness.

Interestingly enough, many of the mercenaries piloted mechs designed by Ves. For the first time in his career, a large number of his products would be tested in an actual combat situation.

And what a test it represented! The fight over the Glowing Planet would definitely spark more than a couple of cautious skirmishers. Wealth had a way of infecting the most prudent individuals with boundless greed. No one was in a mood to back off. Not at this stage.

The mercenaries brought two distinct models to the war zone. First, the Marc Antony Mark II's had become a staple in some mercenary corps. While the LMC never produced very much of them, they still brought a lot of value to the smaller and less financially capable outfits.

The only downside to the Mark II's was that they only functioned for a relatively short period of time. Much like the Havalax, the Mark II excelled at

forcing a quick resolution of a battle. Fortunately, the hybrid mech possessed many tools to force such an outcome.

As for the Blackbeaks, many of their owners and mech pilots had barely gotten a grip on them. The design showed a lot of promise, but aside from a single publicised duel, the Blackbeak hadn't been tested for the role it had been designed to fulfill.

Still, the pilots believed in the machines. The Blackbeaks looked and felt impressive. Actually piloting the wondrously crafted machines proved to be a sublime experience, especially for the limited number of gold label mechs.

EME actually produced most of the Blackbeaks in the hands of the mercenaries going to war. The affordable and more easily available silver label mechs didn't match the quality of the original version, but that didn't lessen their value by much. The guts looked the same no matter their labels, and their pilots readily entrusted their lives to their impressive machines.

It could be said that a lot of eyes kept an eye on the Blackbeak. They wanted to see whether offensive knight had what it took to fight a war. Many professionals with money to spare eagerly awaited the final verdict on the design.

As for Ves, he faced a much more pressing priority. Getting the sad excuses of his mech technicians to work.

"Come on, Mr. Larkinson!" A sleazy-looking fellow whined. "I just checked the integrity of the armor like you told me to do. There aren't any cracks worth mentioning!"

"Lucky."

His mechanical cat jumped from its perch on his shoulder and jumped straight past the bewildered technician.

"OUCH! That hurt!"

Lucky only needed to mark their skins to provide an abject lesson on why they should listen to Ves.

"Don't try to fool my eyes. I know my mechs, and my judgement is telling me that this light mech needs another set of armor. So get off your lazy butt and scan it again!"

"Yes, boss!"

Ves shook his head as the tech scurried back to the scanners. The main issue that plagued the mechs owned by the Whalers was that the mech technicians lacked supervision. They didn't hire a chief technicians to ride on their backs.

This left Ves with the tiresome job of hounding the awful technicians to do the work they should have been doing from the start.

"Really, they've cut so many corners that these mechs could have been round at this point. It's truly a wonder that the Whalers haven't collapsed from all the rust."

It truly vexed Ves to know how badly the Whalers handled their logistics. He wasn't even sure if a single whaler besides Dietrich even knew what that word meant.

Chapter 282 Smooth

The Happy Jelly emerged at the edge of the Glowing Zone in a lurch. Its oft-repaired and barely functional FTL drive strained to bring the ship into realspace without breaking her apart.

Ves gripped the cushioned pod seat tight at the moment of transition, but everyone else simply shrugged off their nausea and went back to work. They had already become used to the violent transitions from the higher dimensions back to the lower ones.

"Damnit, this ship will really kill them all some day." He muttered as the seat automatically withdrew the straps that held him in the pod. "Tell me you didn't enjoy the ride, Lucky."

"Meow!"

Lucky didn't look too chipper either. The glowing blue lines of energy between the gaps of his elegant bronze plating burned bright now. Ves surmised that Lucky already accumulated enough energy to evolve from level 2 to level 3. For some reason, the gem cat held back, likely because Ves needed his help if he wanted to make it through the upcoming campaign.

It didn't help that many of the mechs the Whalers used enjoyed less than stellar maintenance. The lack of leadership, the shortage in manpower and

the pervasive attitude of doing the bare minimum resulted in a lot of heavily degraded mechs.

The mech technicians often dismissed the minor problems that piled up in a mech, unaware that several unrelated errors could cascade into catastrophic faults down the line.

Ves had accessed some of the logs and noticed that the Whalers didn't fight very often. This had allowed the problems to fester, because the Whalers never really experienced a significant loss arising from a lack of maintenance.

Now they faced a reckoning. According to some of the contingency plans the Blood Claws passed to the Whalers, each mech might be facing an average of six intensive engagements. In these kinds of pitched battles, the mechanical state of any mech was of extreme importance.

Too bad none of the Whalers really listened to him. The few times he got hold of Walter, the burly man told him to piss off and bother someone else. When Ves approached the officers like Fadah, they'd tell him that he worried too much.

"Sure, our equipment is crap. That's a fact. They're cheap to get and cheap to use. We break things a lot, so we don't actually bother trying to keep our gear in shape."

Indeed, over seventy percent of the mechs aboard the Happy Jelly consisted of frontline mechs. In addition, the Whalers acquired at least half of them through the grey or black market, so their reliability was questionable.

Their only advantage to the gang was that they cost only several million credits a pop. The most basic frontline mech in the Bright Republic could be bought for five million credits. In comparison, Ves thought that some mechs looked like they'd been salvaged from a battlefield and refurbished up to a point where the Whalers snapped them up for half the minimum price.

Very obviously, the Whalers could put a lot of mechs on the field this way. Most of its members consisted of local recruits from Cloudy Curtain who hadn't been able to attend a fancy advanced academy offworld.

This meant that most of them lacked the training and skills to pilot anything more sophisticated than a barebones frontline mech. It would have been useless for them to pilot something as sophisticated as the Blackbleak as they wouldn't be able to control the mech efficiently.

"That's still no excuse to neglect the maintenance of their mechs!"

Ves wanted to tear his hair out. Even though he kicked the mech technicians assigned to his command into action, they quickly returned to old habits once he walked away. Discipline was nonexistent and playing games on their comms turned out to be their most frequent activity.

It also didn't help that Ves didn't quite fit in with the loose and casual brotherhood the Whalers fostered among themselves. His goodwill for gifting the Blackbeak quickly faded away, and his constant prodding of getting people to work quickly earned him a reputation for being uptight and serious.

He didn't care about what other people thought. Everything he accomplished now was one thing he didn't have to compensate for when the Whalers made landfall.

"That's not far away now. I've got to get the fast-reaction squad in decent shape before we touch down. I won't be able to overhaul these mechs on the surface of an active planet."

The Happy Jelly and the rest of the Whaler fleet slowly gathered in a protective formation and began to fly deeper into the Glowing Zone. On the bridge, a large amount of alerts sounded out as the Jelly's sensors strained to identify all of the active thruster emissions.

"At least five-hundred ships are already burning their way towards the inner zone! Over a third of them haven't activated their transponders!"

"Hah! Looks like the pirates are scrambling to get a piece of the action as well." Walter joked as he gazed upon the giant projection of the Glowing Zone and the ships they detected so far.

It did not look too good. While the Whalers brought around twelve functional mech carriers and four supply ships, much of those ships only carried a dozen or half-a-dozen mechs. Only the Happy Jelly was large enough to receive acknowledgement from the Blood Claws.

Over the next day, the Whaler fleet sluggishly brought their ships towards a random coordinate relative to the Glowing Planet. The Blood Claws along with a handful of smaller outfits already gathered there. The Whaler fleet turned out to be among the last who arrived, much to the consternation of the crew.

"You should have invested more in your ships, then." Ves pointed out to Fadah.

"Every extra credit spent on a ship is one credit less we can invest in our mechs."

Ves could have said that their entire budgeting rested upon a flimsy foundation. Sure, they might not have been able to do anything about the quality of their mech pilots, but they should have put more care in the quality of their mechs.

Right now, Ves had given up on changing their mindsets. They needed to experience the folly of their ways with their own eyes before they became more receptive to his ideas.

"When are the Blood Claws setting off?"

"I'm not sure." Fadah shrugged his shoulders as he patted the Blackbeak. He constantly came back to Ves to demand more adjustments. "Last I heard, all of the outfits that we know of have arrived. We've got over two-hundred ships by ourselves. That's got to be enough to put the Mech Corps to pause."

"I don't think so. The Mech Corps always goes for quality over quantity. The Republic doesn't have the mech pilots to spare for them to throw their lives away so easily. Just one of their carriers can accomplish the same things as your entire Whaler fleet."

"That's a lie!"

"Fadah, even a single fleet carrier outmasses your entire collection of ramshackle converted transports. I can tell, because I've been on one."

There was no getting through Fadah's thick skull. Practically all of the Whalers except Walter only possessed a limited perspective on how the galaxy truly looked like. Walter could have disabused them of their notions, but the gang leader didn't seem to bother.

The delays annoyed the Whalers and much of the other outfits that answered to Monty. Several other fleets such as those led by the mercenary leaders already flew past them as they made their way to the juicy planet. It galled the impatient gang members to see others getting ahead.

That was until one mercenary transport randomly erupted into pieces.

At first, the mercenaries aboard the ship around them thought that someone had sabotaged the vessel. The mercenary commanders quickly acted to stop any trigger-happy mercenaries from firing back.

It turned out the transport had fallen into an invisible curl in spacetime. That quickly halted the vanguard of the fleet. Who could tell if the space ahead hid something else?

The transport met its end at a fairly significant distance of three light-hours away from the Glowing Planet. Such a distance should have been more than enough to ignore any possible emissions from the active planet due to the inverse-square law.

"That's why the Blood Claws haven't gone ahead." Ves realized. "They're waiting for something that can mitigate the glowing planet's hazards."

"Do you reckon it's the Mech Corps we're waiting for?"

"I don't know if the Mech Corps even understands what is happening with the Glowing Planet. My gut tells me they'll borrow the technology from the Coalition or the CFA."

They only had to wait a couple of hours before their answer arrived. The 4th division of the Mech Corps arrived with massive splendor. Their large, specialized carriers had no trouble recovering from the transition and quickly formed into smaller elements before they soared into the Glowing Zone.

Hundreds of carriers built for war escorted a smaller number of essential transports. Ves estimated that the 4th division's fleet brought over ten-thousand mechs spread over five unique regiments.

All the pomp and circumstance succeeded in cowing the other powers. The 4th division boldly sped their way towards the inner zone without fear of falling into any inexplicable hazards.

Before everyone could scratch their heads and wonder whether the Mech Corps had lost their mind, a number of strange transports split up from the main fleet. Several transports moved to each major fleet, including the one centered around the Blood Claws.

News quickly passed on what they contained.

"Those transports are carrying the Republic's gifts! They're carrying something called a dimensional smoother! They emit some kind of field that anchors local realspace and makes it harder for the Glowing Planet to do its freaky stuff!"

The explanation barely satisfied Ves. The so-called dimensional smoother probably had a better name, but the Blood Claws or the Whalers probably couldn't wrap their heads around the original meaning, so they grasped for something simpler to describe its effects.

The name did its job, he supposed. Everyone had been able to imagine the implications of a dimensional smoother. They had to get close to it and hope that it emitted enough power to withstand the Glowing Planet's mood swings.

The Blood Claw fleet received three transports, which quickly took up a triangular formation. Naturally, the ships under Monty's the Betrayer's direct control received the privilege of flying alongside the transports carrying the dimensional smoothers.

The Whalers had been assigned at the furthest edge of the formation. That said a lot about their worth to the Blood Claws.

"They don't think much of us!"

"Worst mistake they ever made!"

"We'll show them what we're made of once we start fighting!"

Truly, the amount of delusion that had infected the Whalers reached a ridiculous level. No matter who he talked to, everyone seemed to think the campaign would be a walk in the park, or at worst a slog through a muddy road.

Only Ves thought that the road ahead resembled a treacherous cliff. Sometimes, he regretted joining the Whaler fleet. He hadn't imagined they'd

be so incompetent. Then he thought about Raella and the missions he accepted from the Society and the System.

He had a feeling the System knew more about the Glowing Planet than anyone else in this star sector. When the System broke its silence and demanded him to seek out something from the planet's core, Ves received a massive fright.

"There's something about the Glowing Planet that nags me. If it only hold a huge amount of junk exotics, how come its emissions are so strong?"

It would have been explainable if a ship ended up dead if it wandered close to the Glowing Planet's orbit. Yet to be able to influence its surrounding space so much to the point of tearing apart a vessel light-hours away, it must be hiding something special.

"I guess we'll see in a day or two when we make landfall."

Once the Blood Claw fleet settled into place, the huge formation slowly swept forward. All the other fleet resumed their journey to the Glowing Planet as well once they gathered around the dimensional smoothers.

Everything seemed fine and dandy, until a large number of ships arrived from a different angle. Alarm swept throughout the ships which figured out the identity of the newcomers.

"It's the Vesians!"

Chapter 283 Landfall

Everyone expected the Vesians to come to the Glowing Planet. How could they not, when its resources lay bare to their archrivals?

Anything the Bright Republic enjoyed, the Vesians always tried to ruin it. They'd been waging several wars against the Bright Republic for over a hundred years just to snatch the Bentheim System.

It was a matter of time before they came.

"They still arrived too quickly." Fadah muttered. "They must have sneaked past the border the moment they heard the news. Not that's it's hard to cross the border anyhow."

In the vast depths of space, borders served a symbolic purpose. The distances involved were simply too large to defend. Still, even if the Vesians strolled past the Republic's outposts, they shouldn't have reached the Glowing Planet for at least a couple more days.

Ves deduced a frightening reason why they showed up so early. "The Vesians already prepared their invasion forces. They finished their mobilization a while ago. It's not too much of a stretch to think they readied their mechs and ships for a short hop across the border."

The Vesians already primed their forces for an invasion. Upon obtaining word of the Glowing Planet, they merely had to gather some extra mining equipment and obtain a couple of dimensional smoothers before they could make their move.

"Damn! They deployed a jamming field! We can't get a good look at what they brought."

The Blood Claw fleet shared some telemetry with the other fleets in order to determine the fleet's makeup, but all they could figure out was that the Vesians numbered in the hundreds.

"It's not a huge fleet, but they can steamroll any other fleet in their way."

Despite their presence at the opposite side of the Glowing Zone, nobody truly panicked as of yet. Just because the Vesians arrived didn't mean they could destroy anything in its way. As long as any fleet built up enough relative velocity, they'd be able to evade any pursuit.

Still, that didn't help too much if a fleet wanted to support their mechs on the ground. Only the most powerful fleets possessed the strength to contest for orbital supremacy.

All of that remained a concern for the future, as the Vesians didn't appear to be in a hurry to move.

"I think the Vesians are waiting for reinforcements. They don't have the numbers to match the 4th Bentheim Division."

"It's likely the Vesians have spread out their forces along the border. The ones who came first just happened to be nearest to the Glowing Planet."

Despite the interruption, the Mech Corps and the other fleets aligned with the Republic resumed their burn to the Glowing Planet. Covered under the protective embrace of the dimensional smoother, none of the ships had to worry about being torn apart by a freak gravitic storm. Still, some of the ships at the edges occasionally shook, as if the Planet attempted to pound past the field emitted by the smoothers.

The Happy Jelly suffered three major impacts, in fact. Ves didn't know whether the transport was unlucky or offended the Glowing Planet in some way, because they all suffered from continuous turbulence.

"This is ridiculous! It's like the Glowing Planet has it out for us!"

Ves approached the lazy technician from behind and kicked him from his perch. "If you have enough free time to complain, then you have enough time to the reassembly. Get to it!"

According to the plan, they'd be making landfall in a day or two. Ves did the best he could with the limited amount of manpower and resources available, and he succeeded in increasing the longevity of the mechs under his purview.

"It's all band aids compared to what they really need. Half of the mechs in the fast-reaction squad are nearing the end of their service life."

At least learned a lot out of this experience. He witnessed many ways in which a mech started to degrade.

The most typical cause of failure was when a mech's processors and delicate components started to falter first.

Those were easy enough to replace. Unfortunately, when larger components showed some signs of giving up, the mech technicians simply shrugged and went back to sleep.

That left many mechs with a dangerous build-up of fragile components that could break as soon as something gave them a little push. Ves had already prepared himself for massive casualties among the Whalers if the Blood Claws didn't give them an easy assignment.

Over the next two days, the Whalers finally turned a little serious. More ships arrived. Hundreds more. Thousands more. An uncountable amount of ships had gathered in the Glowing Zone, and many of them had never been seen before. Very likely, the ships that tried their best to obscure their identities came from murky backgrounds.

The thought of competing against hordes of pirates and other scum forced the ships from the Republic to move quickly. The transports carrying the dimensional smoothers picked up the pace, forcing many outdated transports or converted transports to stress their thrusters to their limits.

All of this had been worth it, because the Blood Claws and their allies arrived over orbit with hardly any opposition as of yet. The 4th Bentheim Division arrived first, of course. Their modern, combat-hardened ships could muscle through anything, and the abundant number of dimensional smoothers in their fleet ensured the planet wouldn't be able to stop their approach.

A number of mechs had already been deployed to the surface. They scouted the terrain and made sure the dimensional smoothers sent alongside them worked as advertised.

The Blood Claws didn't wait for the tests to conclude. They sent down their own mechs to secure the juicy territories allocated to their fleet. Right now, not a lot of ships had neared the Glowing Planet as of yet, as none of the opportunists had access to a dimensional smoother that could grant them safe passage.

"While the pirates and lone wolves are figuring things out, we'll be on the surface picking up credits from the ground!" Walter announced at the main hangar. "Now, the gravity of the planet is only 0.7 g, which is enough for some of our lightest transports to shuttle our mechs down. That said, I'm not feeling confident they'll hold up very long if we do that, so we'll stick with our newest ships."

The Whalers acquired a decent amount of ships in the last couple of years, but none of them possessed clean histories. Walter tentatively picked out two reasonably intact transports to bring their mechs down to the surface.

Fada and the fast-reaction squad had been assigned to the second wave after Walter and his closest men arrived first. Ves had been assigned to the second wave as well along with some supplies and some technicians.

He stared at the projection of the Glowing Planet. Now that they arrived in orbit, Ves got to enjoy a beautiful picture of a planet in chaos.

For some reason, the planet predominately glowed green. Its scarred and broken land masses showed that it had suffered enormously from the event that threw it off into space. Further exotic activity had further damaged the continents until they became an ugly manifestation of the raw forces of the universe.

"How rare are treasure troves like this?"

"Planets like these are come from the galactic heartland." Ves explained to Fadah as they boarded the passenger compartment of the transport. "They're not exactly common, but they're abundant enough that it won't alarm an entire star sector. It's just another tuesday for them as far as they're concerned."

"I guess that's why they use the work junk exotics. As if any exotic is as plain as sand."

The entire incident showcased the disparity between the galactic rim and the galactic heartland. Before the Age of Mechs, humanity had undergone a feverish expansion into the stars. As they travelled towards the galactic center, they came across increasingly more valuable and abundant exotics, to the point where most of the pioneers hardly looked back to Earth.

The galactic rim was the largest but most resource-depleted portion of the galaxy. Sometimes a treasure hunter scored a lucky find, but its value always amounted to a fraction of what someone from the galactic heartland earned in day.

The transport finished loading up the supplies and drifted away from the Happy Jelly. It turned towards the chaotic blackened landscape below and aimed for a spot near the landing site of the Blood Claws.

"Here we go, folks! I suggest you hold on to your crash seats, because we'll be going in fast!"

The transport shuddered severely as it dove towards the surface alongside a Mech Corps vessel that carried a dimensional smoother. The Whaler transport had to endure a punishing descent in order to keep up with the faster Mech Corps ship.

The Glowing Planet didn't possess an atmosphere, but spacetime didn't always work as expected up close. Even within the envelope of the dimensional smoother, the transport still encountered lots of turbulence.

Everyone's crash seats closed up around their bodies in protective pods. The systems governing the transport had judged the situation to be too dangerous.

Inside his seat, Ves quietly waited for the transport to make it through. He held Lucky in his grasp. The cat had grown scared of the intense fluctuations around them.

"It's okay Lucky, we're almost there."

Two agonizing hours later, the transport eased its turbulent flight. They successfully reached the surface of the Glowing Planet. It landed a moment later on a crude landing pad that the first wave prepared after their arrival.

Once the transport shut off its engines and opened up the hatch, everyone released a primal roar for making it out alive.

"Alright, enough hooting around!" Fadah yelled over their comm channel. "Get in your mechs and follow your assignments!"

Similar to Groening IV, the Glowing Planet wasn't able to support human life. Perhaps it might have featured its own alien ecosystem, but getting knocked away from a sun had a tendency to kill off everything living on the surface. Temperatures had reached far below freezing points as well, which forced everyone not inside a mech to wear a bulky hazard suit.

Even Ves didn't dare test his genetically modified body against the frightening chill that pervaded the planet. No sun rested in the sky to warm up its surface. No atmosphere allowed life to breathe any air or propagate any sounds.

When Ves stepped out to the surface, he admired the raw beauty of the broken landscape before him. Among the shards of broken rocks and the ominous glow of green, Ves enjoyed a sensation of wonder and purpose.

"Maybe I should have been a treasure hunter. Setting foot on the unknown always seems to buoy me up."

He let down Lucky on the rocky ground and looked whether he did anything special. The gem cat had already recovered from the harrowing descent, and began to sniff the nearby terrain.

His mouth opened up in a meow that couldn't be heard due to the lack of atmosphere. It didn't matter much as Lucky raced off towards a nearby hill of rocks. Lucky deftly clawed a couple of useless pieces apart until he came across a mineral vein that glowed in low green.

The mechanical cat sliced a generous portion from the rock with his energy claws and began to chop it into finer bits before beginning to gobble them all up.

Ves laughed at the sight. It figured that Lucky would be able to locate any nearby exotics. Lucky loved to eat exotics, though Ves never brought him much due to the expense involved. The LMC would have to go bankrupt in order to satisfy his pet's rapacious appetite.

"Looks like that isn't the case here. The minerals also aren't as tough and hard to find as those found in Groening IV."

While that made it easier for the Whalers to extract some extra wealth, it also presented an irresistible draw to unsavory people. The pirates wouldn't be content to watch on while the rest started pulling riches from the soil.

The Whalers could celebrate for now, but once the riffraff moved into action, they'd be hard-pressed to keep their lives.

Chapter 284 Overcharged

The first set of mining equipment went up within the hour. The Whalers didn't bring much gear, and much of what they acquired must have been third-hand equipment at best.

As predicted, the machines quickly broke down.

"Ves!" Someone called out over the local channel. "Come over and help us fix this piece of junk!"

With quiet resignation, Ves stopped his inspection of a mech that hadn't been able to start up and jogged over with his bulky hazard suit. The mining gear in question consisted of an anchored drill meant to dig its way into the ground in a slanted angle. It didn't cost very much due to its low-tech principles, but the drill bits often wore out quickly.

"What's the problem?"

"The machine crashed right as it was about to get past the top layer!" The techie in charge of the gear complained. "I kicked the control box a couple of times but it isn't doing anything!"

"Maybe it will help if you refrain from kicking the control circuits." Ves grumbled to the man. "Let me take a look at this rusted junk. My guess is this thing is already at its limit."

The amount of people who still believed they could fix a broken machine by slapping it around could form an entire first-rate superstate. Even mech technicians fell into this belief sometimes.

Contrary to his belief, the mining drill had been acquired relatively recently. Whoever sold it to the Whalers did a decent job at patching it up. Its endurance should have been sufficient to operate at these conditions.

"The machine is sound." Ves carefully scoured the exterior of the drill.

"Nothing seems out of place. It's worn, but not broken. Maybe it's just run out of power."

"That's impossible! It just received a fresh energy cell!"

Ves called for a scanner while continuing to inspect the drill. It hadn't hit anything hard and it didn't look like it had been tampered with. Nothing had jammed the mechanisms either.

He wanted to check the programming of the machine as well, but the lack of power prevented him from doing so. He'd have to pull the processors from the mining gear in order to inspect the software, and that was a lot of hassle for a single broken drill.

Once someone brought over a man-sized scanner, Ves used it to inspect the innards of the machine. Even though he didn't specialize in designing mining equipment, the simple drill in front of him didn't pose any challenge to him. He easily identified most components and reasonably surmised they didn't look broken.

"I found nothing strange so far." Ves concluded after he finished scanning the entire drill. "The hardware looks okay. I'm inclined to say it's either the software or the power supply that's at fault."

"Maybe the Glowing Planet did something to the drill. You know, like overload its processors and stuff."

"There's no sign of any damage to the processors, but perhaps it's programming has been tampered with. I'll have to extract the chips and bring them back to the temporary workshop that's being set up right now."

Still, Ves had a suspicion that the power supply might be at fault. The drill did shut down completely as if its power had disappeared. Ves carefully called for

some tools and began to expose the energy cell powering the drill. He carefully inspected the amount of energy.

"This doesn't make any sense. The energy cell is at two-hundred-and-thirteen percent capacity. That's impossible!"

Ves carefully placed the energy cell back into its slot and backed away quickly. An overloaded energy cell could easily blow up in his face. Even his hazard suit and strengthened body wouldn't survive the sheer amount of power released by the explosion.

"When did you last put this energy cell into the drill?"

"Just a couple of hours ago when the transport shipped the mining gear onto the surface! I swear the energy cell looked normal! The drill even said its cell had been charged up to seventy-three percent!"

Energy cells deteriorated over time and when people used them. It wouldn't be surprising for an energy cell as old as this to charge up to seventy-three percent.

"So how did it suddenly end up with more than triple its maximum charge?"

No one could answer that question. All of the technicians around Ves appeared clueless. They would have scratched their heads if their hazards suits weren't in the way.

"Okay, just set this energy cell aside and put another one in it. Better yet, just hook it up to something else and drain it. Just do it somewhere quiet."

No one wanted to deal with a potential bomb, so Ves assigned a random technician to deal with the problem.

Everyone thought that should have been the end of it, until two different mining equipment shut down at the same time. The Whalers placed more

importance on their mining gear than their mechs at this point, so Ves had to pull away from a broken mech again to inspect the disabled machines.

Once might have been a coincidence, but twice and thrice should be a deliberate occurrence. "I'm going to make a guess and say that these diggers are suffering from the same problem."

Different from the drill, the diggers excelled at burrowing into terrain. They also strengthened the tunnels they carved out, allowing mechs to tread inside without risking a collapse.

Ves didn't approach the machines himself this time. He called for a couple of bots and carefully controlled them through his comm. They carefully exposed the energy cell and carried some tools to test their charge.

Both cells possessed way more charges than they should. "This cell is two-and-a-half times overcharged, while that other cell holds more than five times the amount of energy it should!"

Everyone backed off even further from the digging machine that held that remarkable energy cell. Not one of them possessed the courage to do something about it. Ves had to tackle the problem himself by using bots to extract the energy cells and throwing them far away.

Panic had a way of spreading quickly. Word of the faulty energy cells had reached the entire makeshift camp. No one wanted to operate the mining equipment in person. They all stepped away from the machines and tentatively controlled them by remote, which lowered their efficiency by half.

The problem had become so severe that Walter showed in person. "What's this nonsense about overcharged power cells?!"

"Sir, the energy cells aren't sound. Any cell that's put into a mining gear will randomly acquire several times the energy it should have been able to hold at its best. I've inspected some of the cells and even disassembled one after I

drained its charge. Nothing points to any foul play. I even checked their logs. They've all been charged up to their safest maximum capacity."

That didn't say much to Ves, as the logs could have easily been tampered with by a malicious actor. Even Melkor with his limited training could have accomplished such a job on outdated hardware such as this. If only the Whalers brought some actual security experts on the expedition. He could have left the puzzling to them instead of relying on his limited computer skills.

Walter grumbled a bit underneath his strengthened piloting helm. "Whatever it is, it's affecting our earnings. We aren't getting much of a share from the Blood Claws, so we have to do our own digging to make the expedition worth it. We can't afford to let these machines go idle!"

"I really don't know what's going on. It could be sabotage or it could be the Glowing Planet acting up. I suggest you contact the Blood Claws and tell them about the problems we are having. Maybe they are dealing with something similar."

They briefly waited while Walter switched to another channel. All of the interference outputted by the Glowing Planet made wireless communications almost impossible, but the Blood Claws extended hardline connections to each peripheral group.

"The guy I spoke to wants us to send them all the relevant data." Walter gruffed after he switched back to the local channel. "He seems really pushy about it as well. Makes me think they're dealing with the same problem."

That ruled out sabotage as a possible cause. His hunch that the Glowing Planet might be responsible for the faulty energy cells grew stronger.

Ves wordlessly passed the logs and other files he gathered to Walter, who sent them on to the Blood Claws.

"He shut the channel!"

"I don't think the Blood Claws can give you answers at this time."

If the problem turned out to be widespread, then that changed the entire equation. Both mechs and mining equipment had to be used with care. Ves specifically included mechs into his consideration because they used the same type of energy cells that powered the mining equipment.

"What about fuel-based energy cells?" A tech suddenly spurted out. "They should still work fine, since they don't contain any pure energy."

The idea had a lot of merit. Ves couldn't believe a Whaler actually made such a keen observation before he came up with it himself. "That's a brilliant idea. Let me check something out. Don't do anything stupid while I'm gone."

He left Walter and the clueless technicians behind and raced off towards where the fast-reaction squad had holed up. "Fadah!"

"Yeah, Ves?" The old man yawned as he tried to sleep inside his bulky reinforced piloting suit. "What's the hurry?"

"Get inside the Blackbeak and do some exercises."

"Why the hell would I do that? My mech needs to be in tip-top shape in case any trouble arrives."

"We're already in trouble! Haven't you heard about the overcharged energy cells? It's not only affecting us, but the Blood Claws as well! I need you to get inside the Blackbeak and expend its fuel. We need to test whether fuel-based energy cells are affected by this phenomenon as well."

Even though Fadah grumbled about missing his routine afternoon nap, he knew that Walter would get on his back if he continued to refuse. He reluctantly climbed into the cockpit and activated the mech.

"Okay, just find a place where you won't be disturbed and try to drain its fuel as fast as possible."

"Hah! I can do fast!"

Once he stepped inside his mech, it was as if Fadah turned into an entirely different pilot. He enthusiastically brought the Blackbeak forward and found a nearby empty valley to practice some advanced techniques.

While the complicated movements should cause the fuel cell to drain faster than usual, Ves designed the Blackbeak to last for an extremely long time.

It's low-burning power reactor and highly efficient engine didn't give the Blackbeak any means to drain its power quickly, unlike a cannonneer mech that could easily drain its energy reserves as long as it paid attention to its heat management.

Ves didn't expect a result, and even if nothing happened to the Blackbeak's energy supply, it didn't mean that other fuel-based machines were immune. Ves tracked down several other fuel-based mechs and harried their pilots into draining their reserves.

As Ves watched the mechs go off on their jaunts, he sighed inside his helmet. "Even if these fuel-based mechs are immune, it won't help our mining equipment at all. They're all powered by pure energy."

He guessed that even the more sophisticated mining equipment in the hands of the Blood Claws and the Mech Corps operated on energy as well. It was safer, more compact and easy to slot into a variety of machines.

Right now, the entire Whaler mining operation had ground to a virtual halt. Hardly any operator pushed their machines. They feared setting off the energy cells inside of them should they draw a lot of power.

Ves figured that the best miner in their camp should be Lucky. His gem cat behaved like connoisseur who sneaked into a top-class banquet. Trash exotics didn't interest him anymore. Only the choicest of exotics deserved consumption.

Despite the massive power consumption of his energy claws, Lucky probably gained that back and more with each rare exotic broken down in his stomach. His energy reserves must be bulging with power.

"Wait a minute." Ves stood up in alarm. How could Lucky accumulate so much energy when he already reached the threshold of evolving to the next level? Only one thing could explain it. "Damn it! Lucky! Where are you?!"

Chapter 285 Discharge

Lucky could take care of himself. Ves had no doubt about that. The gem cat gifted by the System possessed a keen mind and a lively personality. His bronze-like mechanical body also hid a number of cutting-edge technologies that should have been exclusive to the first-rate superstates.

Still, his cat worked like any other animated pet and ran on an extremely compact high-capacity energy source. Ves suspected that his shield generator, which was another source of consternation right now, utilized the same type of energy storage as well.

All of that energy pressed into a tiny battery made for a very volatile package. Who knew how much overcharge these super-advanced could actually take.

"The regular batteries haven't blown up yet so far. That should be a good sign."

Ves didn't want to contemplate the sight of scattered bronze-like parts. He quickly activated his comm and activated the tracker, only to come up with an error message that stated that it couldn't find a signal.

"Damn this interference!"

He ran around asking people if they saw his cat. Lucky became a known figure during their stay with the Whalers, so everyone recognized him on sight.

"Your fancy cat? Oh yeah, he just raced towards the right an hour ago."

"Lucky dug up something near the mining drill over there before turning around to go the other way."

"That little critter stole my shiny ore! I was holding on to it when he swiped it from my fingers and ran off over the hill over there!"

Hearing the stories about Lucky made it clear his cat didn't suffer any ill effects as of yet. In fact, he seemed downright exuberant. That could be good or bad. Good in that Lucky thought he wasn't in danger. Bad in that he continued to take in more energy, thereby ratcheting up his energy density to a catastrophic level.

"Where are you, Lucky?"

After spending more than an hour chasing spurious leads, Ves finally tracked Lucky down in a craggy obsidian valley. Ves found a little mound where Lucky had dug into the rocky ground until he reached a deposit of glowing green chunks.

As if he had no care in the world, Lucky lazily munched the pieces he dislodged with his claws. The cat winked his eyes and swished his tails like he enjoyed the best buffet in his entire life.

"Lucky! There you are!"

His cat turned around and gazed at him for a second before turning back to resume his never-ending eating spree. To Lucky, Ves didn't appear to be as important as highly energetic exotic minerals.

The lack of air on the Glowing Planet prevented any sounds from being propagated, but Lucky somehow found a way to transmit his voice through the local comm channel.

"Let me take a look at you. I need to see whether you're about to burst from all of your consumption."

Ves carefully took out a portable scanner and tried to look inside Lucky's innards. Unfortunately, Lucky's extraordinary exterior blocked any scans, not that Ves understood how Lucky worked in the first place.

He could only judge his cat's exterior for signs of any danger. Last Ves saw him, his cat featured glowing blue lines in the gaps between his outer plates. The stronger the glow, the more energy his cat had accumulated.

Right now, the glow had turned into a shade of green, the same shade emitted by the Glowing Planet in fact. Lucky might have acquired some of the traits endemic to the planet.

"What's going on with you? Why are you glowing green all of a sudden?"

Typical for Lucky, the cat ignored him entirely. Ves had already learned he wouldn't be able to get his pet to respond. Lucky also wouldn't appreciate being taken away from this treasure of a planet.

"Alright, I give up. Just continue to munch if you wish. Just don't go too far and stop when you feel bloated."

"Meow!"

Even though the overcharge phenomenon concerned Ves a lot, he slowly started to suspect that the energy cells might not be as unstable as he thought. He returned to the camp of the Whaler and approached the boss.

"Ves." Walter gruffed at him over a private comm. "Did you figure out what's going on yet?"

"Not really. I think the planet or a particular combination of exotics are to blame for the overcharged energy cells. It's able to affect any kind of cell that works on energy, and I don't think it's limited to mech-sized energy cells. The batteries that power our comm and other equipment should be susceptible to

the phenomenon as well, although we haven't seen any smaller gear being affected as of yet."

"So what does this all mean for us?"

Ves paused for a moment. He was about to make a very dangerous suggestion. "I think we should continue to work with the overcharged energy cells. We should test them as well, but we can't wait for the results."

The biggest issue right now was that the Vesians, pirates and other opportunistic scum would move in eventually. When that happened, the Mech Corps shifted to phase 2, retracting most of its mining operations around the planet to fortify one single red zone.

The Blood Claws and Walter's Whalers would also have to abandon this promising mineral-rich area and move towards the edge of the perimeter set by the military.

As expected, Walter gave in to the suggestion. "You're right. This is the best time to be mining exotics. We can't afford to sit around and wait for a miracle to save us."

They announced their decision to the Whalers, which stunned them into a stupor.

"I ain't gonna work with these bombs! It's suicide!"

"It's not safe to pilot any mech!"

"SHUT UP!" Walter yelled over the channel, overriding everyone else's complaints. "We came here to make our fortune, and we always knew that we'd be facing danger. Compared to fighting other mechs, what's so scary about a few supercharged energy cells?"

While his words made sense, it didn't reassure them at all. Enemies haven't shown up yet so it was easy for them to dismiss those distant threats. In contrast, they sat right next to those overcharged energy cells.

Ves left the job of motivating the men to work to Walter, since it directly affected the earnings of his gang. For once, Ves didn't have to kick around the Whalers by himself, leaving him free to investigate the overcharged energy cells. He ordered the technicians to gather a couple of the cells in question.

"What do you want to do with these cells?" A techie asked as his bot delivered the cell to a pile of other affected cells. None of the technicians went close to those cells.

"The first thing I want to find out is what happens if we blow it up."

To prevent any panic among the men, Ves decided to conduct his experiments far away from the camp. He brought a cell to an open depression behind a mass of jagged hill and moved behind cover. He already affixed an explosive to the cell in question.

After setting up some sensors and scanners, Ves detonated the charge.

A massive blast engulfed the site. Electric discharge blasted out and reached out over fifty meters away. Nobody up close could have withstood the blast.

From the readings Ves had made, he determined that the mining equipment had no chance of making it out unscathed, especially since the energy cells had to be placed inside of them where the manufacturers only included basic safeguards against accidental discharges.

Just to be sure, Ves blew up a variety of overcharged cells. Some only carried an overcharge of 150 percent, while the worst ones boasted an overcharge close to 700 percent.

The results didn't reassure him at all. The power of the blast was directly proportional to the amount of overcharge contained within the affected cells. By his reckoning, the 700 percent cell could even overpower the Blackbeak's impressive armor system.

Ves used his last cells to test whether they had become more volatile. He controlled a couple of bots to heap abuse on the poor cells. From throwing them from above, to dropping increasingly heavier rocks on them, Ves didn't spare any mercy for the devices.

Surprisingly enough, the cells held up. Their designs came with many safeguards that prevented them from blowing up, and all of these measures worked as advertised despite their lackluster quality.

Walter's Whalers might buy cheap components, but they made sure they selected the most rugged ones in their price range. All of the energy cells they used came from reputable manufacturers whose designs had been tested over and over in the frontier.

Once Ves finally pushed an energy cell past its limit, its final safeguards insured that most of the energy discharge harmlessly fried the ground.

"Strange. Why do the safeguards still work despite dealing with such a massive amount of energy?"

Ves ordered the bots to pack up the scanners and bring them back to the pack while he mused about the issue. The entire overcharge phenomenon seemed strange. They blew up with incredibly fanfare if affected by an explosion, but regular physical abuse seemed to treat them like they didn't hold an overcharge at all.

The results led him to a strange but compelling conclusion. He immediately sought out Walter and opened up a private channel.

"The men reported lots of flashes over the hill. Did you find out what's the big deal about these cells?"

"I think I figured out what's going on. It's not that these energy cells suddenly received an injection of excess energy. In the perspective of the energy cells, they always contained the same amount of charge."

Walter couldn't wrap his head around the explanation. "So it's an illusion? It's all fake?"

"If the overcharge phenomenon is an illusion, then it shouldn't have forced the mining equipment to shut down. You see, the energy cells think they contain a normal charge, but the mining equipment detect they're dealing with an overcharge. This triggers their safeguards and forces them to shut down."

That still didn't illuminate the issue to Walter, so Ves dumbed down his explanation even further.

"Look, imagine a bottle of water. The bottle thinks its filled to the brim. There's nothing unusual about that. However, when someone picks it up and is about to take a couple of swallows, he sees the bottle is under an immense amount of pressure. Somehow, the bottle is carrying thrice the amount of water than it should have fit."

"If that's the case, then the bottle shouldn't be able to fit that much liquid at all." Walter replied. "Your example is rubbish."

Ves shrugged off the complaint. "Actually, it's possible if you use extreme pressure, but forget about all that. Just assume that the bottle is carrying three times as much water than it ought to. Now, you have a bottle that thinks it contains a normal amount, and an outside observer who sees that it holds an excess amount of water."

"Then who is right?"

"Both of them. Neither of them."

That really got Walter lost again. Ves sighed and palmed his head, only to bump his helmet with his hazard suit's gauntlet.

"It's complicated, I know, but just bear with me. Rather than say one side is right and one side is wrong, it's more apt to say that the Glowing Planet has affected the fabric of reality in such a way that a quantity of water is somehow turned into a larger quantity of liquid, but it still takes up as much space as the smaller quantity."

"And this means?"

"Ultimately, it means the overcharged energy cells won't blow up on their own. It takes a lot of effort to get them to explode, just like what would already happen to a regular energy cell. Basically, you can throw the energy cells around and you won't risk any explosions in this way, but if you place them in front of a laser rifle and fire at them, you'll get a massive blast in return."

This changed the rules of engagement in a major way. The mining equipment wouldn't explode from regular use, though the technicians would have disable some of their safeguards to get them to work.

The real danger came from combat. Both mechs and mining equipment that contained any overcharged energy cells became extremely susceptible to catastrophic explosions.

The worst thing about it was that the problem would only get worse. As time went on, more and more energy cells continued to receive an overcharge. By the end of the week, Ves predicted that pretty much every energy cell based on direct energy turned into a potential bomb.

The only cells that remained free of the problem consisted of fuel-based energy cells like the one he incorporated in the Blackbeak.

"That reminds me, how's much progress has Fadah made in draining his mech's energy reserves."

Chapter 286 Approach

The Whalers went back to work while the Technicians modified every machine. They manually disabled the safeguards that prevented them from working if they detected any abnormalities from their energy cells.

It all put the workers operating the mining equipment on pins and needles. They hardly became enthusiastic about the prospect of working next to potential bombs.

"I didn't sign up for this! Even slaves have it better than this!"

Walter raced down towards the idiot who said that over the local channel and knocked his helmet with a meaty fist. "Shut up you idiot! How can you call yourself a Whaler when you cower away before an enemy has even showed up? Stop dragging your feet and get back on that machine!"

Ves felt a vindictive sense of satisfaction at seeing Walter try to push his men and women to work. He finally reaped what he sowed for making it normal for his men to skip out on their work.

Still, if the mining operators had it bad, then the mech pilots had it worse. Their high-powered mechs burned through energy as fast as Lucky munched through minerals.

Not only did mechs carry lots of energy cells, they also used more potent types that crammed as much energy in as little space as possible. While they came with the latest and most advanced safeguards available to their manufacturers, it still didn't detract from the fact that they blew up under certain circumstances.

Now, all those energy cells slowly turned into portable bombs slotted straight into the spines of every mech. Ves estimated that around eighty percent of all

mechs ran on energy cells. Mechs that ran on fuel cells typically enjoyed less popularity due to the difficulties involved with resupply.

In fact, the Whalers themselves had to borrow a few containers of medium-density mech-grade fuel to keep the Blackbeak running.

Ves approached Blackbeak. He ordered Fadah to exercise the mech and see whether it showed any abnormalities with regards to its power supply. Right now, a technician replaced the spent fuel cells, showing that the exercise had finally finished.

"Did anything stand out when you used up all of its fuel?"

Fadah yawned behind his helmet. "Yeah, the mech lasted far too long. This rogue planet's reduced gravity also isn't helping much. Your mech is so goddamn efficient that I had to dive in the operating system and crank up the power past its ordinary limits."

That didn't sound so good to Ves. "Overloading your mech won't do it any good. Now I'll have to check your Blackbeak again for any faults."

"Whatever. In any case, the Blackbeak worked like a charm. Every move is light and responsive and the power draw looks normal as well."

Ves confirmed Fadah's observation by inspecting the logs. Everything operated within parameters. The fuel cells hadn't suddenly become stuffed with additional fuel, and the power reactor also functioned as normal.

It was as if the Blackbeak cheerfully went about its day while most of its fellow mechs developed diseases.

This finding came as a huge relief to Fadah. "Looks like enemies won't be able to pop me in a single hit."

The news spread quickly, and over the next couple of hours, Ves received word from the Blood Claws that they observed the same results, barring some

exceptions. Certain ranged weapons drew their power from magazines instead of a mech's internal power supply. These mechs still remained vulnerable to the overcharge phenomenon even if the mechs themselves ran on fuel.

"There's nothing we can do about it." Ves told the people who asked for a fix. "As far as I'm aware of, the Glowing Planet is emitting a field that changes the properties of the energy cells on the fly. We can't even detect it, let alone block it from affecting our gear."

"Don't we have the dimensional smoother to protect us from this stuff?"

"The dimensional smoother is not a miracle device. It's designed to fulfill a very specific role. Its main job is to stabilize the surrounding gravitics so people won't get turned inside out or get thrown into orbit all of a sudden. You'd need a different machine to affect electromagnetic fluctuations."

The Whalers, the Blood Claws and every other force on the planet eventually resumed their work. After the first modified machines operated normally, people started to let down their guards. Ves had been right that the energy cells wouldn't blow up on its own if it received a tiny bump. It took a lot more effort to get them to explode.

A couple of days went by as everyone on the planet hurried to extract as much exotics as possible. As long as nobody attacked their mechs or equipment, they didn't have to be afraid of anything.

For some reason, the Glowing Planet didn't agree. Ever since they made landfall, the men started to suffer from hallucinations. They saw things that shouldn't be there, talked to people who already died and even thought they'd been sent to an alternate universe.

Only one in thousand reported abnormalities like this, and everyone else dismissed them as paranoid delusions triggered by anxiety. No one wanted to

admit that the Glowing Planet had even more weirdness in store for them. Half of the energy cells they brought to the surface had already become overcharged.

Two developments in space delivered bad news to the forces on the planet. The Bright Republic's mortal enemy had finally made their move.

"The Vesians are coming!"

The massive Vesian armada consisted of over two-thousand ships, the majority of which carried a mix of spaceborn and landbound mechs. Sending so many ships must have meant the Vesians had committed to a battle for supremacy over the Glowing Planet. They obviously played for keeps and angled to take its bountiful wealth away from the Republic.

"We only have three more days until the Vesians reach orbit! Mine as much as we can, because we'll be moving camp in two days!"

The workers finally disregarded their concerns about safety in an effort to dig up as much higher quality exotics as possible. They left the ubiquitous junk exotics aside in favor of smaller quantities of ores that yielded tiny amounts of pure exotics. The Whalers didn't possess the necessary facilities to process the ores on site, so they had to leave the bulk materials behind.

During this time, the mercenaries finally arrived over the glowing planet. A significant amount of mercenaries hired themselves to the Republic, enabling them to make use of the 4th division's dimensional smoothers.

Still, despite being in their camp, the Mech Corps didn't trust them very much, leaving them to make landfall in some of the least active zones on the Glowing Planet. The mercenary lords probably aimed to avoid contesting the hotspots in favor accumulating a steady amount of exotics.

Not every mercenary lord decided to bat for the Republic. They wanted to remain independent in order to reap the richest harvests. The mercenary lords

in charge of those fleets held back their forces at the outer edge of the Glowing Zone in order to wait for an opportunity to pounce.

That left the scattered pirate groups. Each outfit stayed on their own. Unlike the mercenaries, the pirates lacked a charismatic leader that could draw the separate groups together. They seemed destined to remain scattered and distrustful.

That was until the notorious Dragons of the Void arrived.

They came with only three hundred ships, many of which appeared to be of dubious quality. Ves was old friends with the Dragons of the Void, so he knew about their modus operandi.

"Most of those ships are cannon fodder. Don't mistake their crew as part of the Dragons of the Void. They're actually brainwashed to the point where they'd eagerly meet their deaths if the Dragons gave the order. The real core of the Dragon fleet consists of only a dozen ships at the center of their formation."

Fadah frowned at that news. "If they treat those ships as trash, then they'll treat their mechs the same way. Do you reckon they'll be scared of any overcharged energy cells?"

"The leaders will probably see it as a welcome surprise." Ves pressed his lips. "I can already imagine them looking forward to strapping additional energy cells onto their mechs and sending them off as suicide bombers."

The Bright Republic enjoyed the home advantage of being nearest to the Glowing Planet. They'd also been able to forge a loose cooperation with the non-governmental forces that nominally swore allegiance to the Republic. The Mech Corps continually reinforced the 4th division with ships and mechs, but their efforts were hobbled by the need to defend vital territories such as Bentheim and their bases.

If every non-Republic force decided to gang up on the Mech Corps, they'd be hard-pressed to last more than a couple of days.

"Keep watch on the mercenaries who haven't picked a side." Fadah advised Ves as they continued to tweak the Blackbeak. "As soon as one gets the upper hand, the mercenaries who remain free up to that point will throw their entire weight behind the strongest faction."

Ves found that advice to be perplexing. "Most of those mercs are based in the Republic. Many of them have families and friends who are Republican citizens as well."

"Do you think that matters if they can become rich overnight? They'll sell out their own mothers in a heartbeat if they can earn a couple of million credits."

All of this led to an increasingly tense mood in the camp. The Whalers regretfully secured their harvest and packed up their gear as they waited in line to be brought to their new location by their small rickety transports.

The transfer finished a day later. This time, the Whalers maintained serious expressions as they worked to setup a defensive position.

Using prefabricated structures provided by the Blood Claws, they built a tall but easily erected set of walls. To prevent any aerial mechs from bypassing the walls with impunity, the Whalers also prioritized the construction of the anti-air turrets.

The only snag came when Walter ordered the defenses be powered by a central power source.

"These laser turrets are designed with energy cells in mind." Ves replied when Walter ordered him to make it happen. "I can't just snap my fingers and make them run on a power line!"

"I don't care. I don't want these turrets to be a hazard in our defenses. I'm hardly able to get my pilots to keep piloting their mechs. I can't deal with a base that's riddled with bombs. Everything needs to be run from two or three underground power sources, nothing more."

Ves quietly shook his head as Walter turned to yell at someone else. The man had been in an awful mood ever since the overcharge phenomenon shook up his men. The technicians already worked their sweat off by overriding all of the safeties. Now they had to deal with another pile of work by hooking up the turrets to a central power supply.

At least the Blood Claws had been generous enough to supply a few spare reactors. Their condition looked decent as well. Unlike the Whalers, the hardened Blood Claws didn't stint on logistics.

"Let's get to work." He sighed, and began to gather up some mech technicians to assist him with the task.

Even though he grumbled about the job in front of Walter, it actually didn't require too much thought to hook up the laser turrets to a different power source. The feature had already been baked into their design. Ves merely needed to teach the mech technicians to make the right connections.

The Vesians would arrive near orbit in less than a day. Anything could happen at that point. Currently, the Bright Republic's mech carriers would be fools to stay in orbit. They'd likely pull out later in the day in order to give themselves more maneuvering room while still staying close enough to the Glowing Planet to provide support for their troops on the ground.

"This will be the first time I'll face the Vesians in open combat."

"Hah! They're not as scary as they look once you look past their craziness." Fadah remarked over a beer. They both took a break from their tasks and left their bulky suits to eat dinner. "I fought the Vesians in the last war. They

always press forward, and you can expect their lower ranks to never give up. The officers are always the first ones to run away once the battle turns against them. Pff. Nobles."

A low anticipation had built up inside Ves for weeks. Even though the prospect of facing an extremely well-armed mech force terrified him to the bone, he also felt some eagerness to test his mech against them. The Blackbeak's entire purpose centered around fighting the Vesians.

"Whatever happens, tomorrow we'll be tested."

Chapter 287 Ghanso

The Glowing Zone reached out around five light-hours away from the Glowing Planet. It was an empty mass of space that contained virtually nothing except the malignant influences of the exotics residing on the Glowing Planet. The further you went in, the more susceptible to anomalies you became.

All of this rested on probability. The chance of crashing your ship went up to a hundred percent once you reached close enough to orbit the Glowing Planet. Even if the dimensional smoothers helped with negating the worst of the dangers, the Glowing Planet still found ways to torment the visitors disturbing its silent vigil.

Ghanso Larkinson chewed on a stimulant as he stared out of the porthole of his tiny shuttle. He recently finished an additional training course and had been transferred to the 1st Volari Starhawks of the 4th Bentheim Division.

"Are you nervous, kid?" An older mech pilot casually asked from the seat next to Ghanso's. "The big bad Vesians are less than a day away. If you want to back out from the fight, you best pull out now."

"I'm a Larkinson. Fighting the Vesians is in my blood."

"Hah! A Larkinson, are you? Then I hope you don't fumble about like Melinda Larkinson. I would have whooped Captain Vicar within five minutes!"

Ghanso believed the older pilot, but that comparison wouldn't have been fair, considering that Captain Vicar was still in his early thirties.

The shuttle slowly entered the belly of a fleet carrier and parked itself on a busy loading platform. Every transfer debarked from the shuttle and followed the navigational guidelines projected by their military-grade comms.

Ghanso and the old man happened to be assigned to the same unit. When it became clear they walked to the same destination, the man introduced himself.

"Looks like we'll be putting our lives in each other hands." The man casually laughed while scratching balding grey hair. Unlike most other men, the pilot didn't bother seeking any treatment for his baldness. "You can call me Alex Dirge. I'm a tried and true space knight pilot."

That garnered some respect from Ghanso. In the vast distance of space, most battles occurred across very long distances. Lasers and missiles formed the bedrock of a spaceborn mech squad's armaments. Sometimes, enemies veered close enough to make railguns and ballistic rifles effective.

Yet spaceborn mechs almost never resorted to melee weapons. Mechs in space possessed too much mobility for them to be pinned down. A rifleman mech always massed lighter than a knight mech, so it could easily dash away from any knight that tried to approach it from afar.

This fundamental disparity relegated the space knight archetype to a purely defensive role, whose only job was to absorb enemy missile fire that would have otherwise struck their allies. There was nothing wrong with that role, but the sheer amount of firepower being exchanged made it very difficult for space knights to remain relevant throughout the battle.

"I should be thanking you for covering my back." Ghanso said sincerely. "I'm a laser rifleman, so I'll be counting on you to block the Vesian missile volleys."

He truly respected anyone who piloted a space knight and survived long enough to the point of growing grey hair. The Vesian penchant for fielding lots of missileers gave the pilots of the Republic a lot of appreciation for the underutilized defensive mech type.

The pair reached a hangar that predominantly serviced spaceborn mechs. They followed the end of the line projection by their comms and met their new commanding officer, who turned out to be a middle-aged female captain with violet eyes and short black hair.

After a brief introduction in which the pair passed over their orders, the captain looked at them with an eager glint in her eyes.

"I'm really glad you made it in time. You're sorely needed to replace a pair of cowards who chickened out when they heard we'd be facing the Vesians in the first wave."

"Seriously, ma'am? A couple of Volari Starhawks actually lost their nerves?" Alex asked with incredulity in his tone.

"Hey, don't get caught up by all the propaganda. Sure, we're the Volar Starhawks, one of the Republic's best spaceborn regiments, but not all of us are crack troops."

Captain Rynsel had been with the Volar Starhawks for a fair amount of time, but like many other mech pilots, she stagnated at the upper limit of what an advanced pilot could reach. As Rynsel grew older, the prospect of ever advancing to expert pilot became further out of reach.

This diminished her importance to the brass. She only made it to captain because she also possessed enough skills to lead a regular platoon.

"You're going to have to become used to your mechs as fast as possible, because the Vesians are expected to reach orbit at the end of the day."

Alex grumbled a bit. "They sure are in a hurry. The Vesians must be confident of their numbers."

"We still have the edge in quality." Ghanso quickly replied. "Even if we didn't bring a lot of ships, we made sure to send some of our best. Besides, we also have our allies to soak up some of the incoming fire."

"Heh. Allies. More like parasites. You can't count on gangs and mercenaries to stand up to the Vesians. Mark my words, their ships will find all kinds of excuses to drop out of action."

The Mech Corps had a very dim view on gangs, and barely tolerated their existence due to their uncanny ability to evade crackdowns.

Mercenaries also earned some contempt for two reasons. First, they employed a lot of talentless hacks that failed to pass the entry qualifications of the Mech Corps and often made a mess of things on the battlefield. Second, they also took away talented pilots with promises of better pay.

The two transferred pilots passed over to Lieutenant Fairfax, who led their assigned squad.

"Right." Fairfax spoke as he regarded the younger Ghanso and the older Alex. "It's about time you two showed up. I've been asking for more bodies but the bureaucrats upstairs keep reinforcing the elite squads before I get a turn. As if they don't already have enough resources!"

Privately, Ghanso thought he deserved a spot on those elite squads as well. He was a Larkinson, for the Republic's sake! Still, at least he secured a place amongst the Volari Starhawks, one of the most distinguished spaceborn regiments of the Republic.

The two recruits had very little time to familiarize themselves with their mechs and tweak them to their liking. Ghanso had been assigned to a fairly standard

Vhendra, a model developed in-house by a design team working for the Starhawks.

"The Vhendra is an old design, but that means it's been tested over the years. It's a reliable frame, and a classic in the Starhawks." The chief technician explained to Ghanso as he patted the surface of the giant dark blue rifleman mech.. "This one happens to be the Vhendra-S. It's a minor variant that gives you faster flight speed but will last a little less. Its long-range accuracy also won't be as impressive, as the added power to the flight system introduces a lot of extra vibrations."

"I see. That's not what I expected. I specifically noted that I'm a marksman."

"Yeah, and Lieutenant Fairfax has been nagging command for new replacement pilots for ages now. You're the unlucky chap command has sent to shut him up."

Ghanso had a relatively balanced skill-set for a laser rifleman pilot, but he preferred to pick opponents off from longer ranges. Still, he could roll with the changes. His mech just had to get closer to the enemy in order to land a sure shot.

"Let's take a look and make some quick adjustments." Ghanso said. "We need to be ready to fight within eighteen standard hours. That's when the Vesians will get in range."

To be honest, eighteen hours was not enough for Ghanso to acclimate himself with a new ride. A mech pilot always required weeks of practice, immersion and tweaking in order to make a mech entirely his own.

The Vesians wouldn't give them the time. The hours went by quickly, and besides a brief but necessary rest, Ghanso worked frenziedly to get the Vhendra-S to behave a little more like its base model.

A red light flashed through the hangar and throughout the rest of the fleet carrier.

"It's time!"

"The Vesians are here!"

A surge of fear and anticipation swept the mech pilots and the crew of the ship. They realized that this might be the outbreak of the latest Bright-Vesia Wars. The Volari Starhawks happened to receive the dubious honor of blunting the first charge.

"Mech pilots, get to your mechs!" Captain Rynsel hollered as she swept up her piloting suit. "We've received orders to deploy within ten minutes, so chop chop!"

The mech technicians had already wrapped up most of their maintenance work, so every mech under Captain Rynsel's command came online in record time.

Alex opened up a private channel to Ghanso. "Hey, little Larkinson. Is this your first deployment?"

"I'm not a rookie. I've fought over six separate engagements against pirates."

"Well, the Vesians are nothing like those ruffians who can't coordinate their mechs to save their lives. We're playing in a whole different league right now. Don't lose your breakfast in the next fight, little Larkinson."

It irked the young Larkinson to be treated like an inexperienced recruit. He was a Larkinson! He grew up hearing stories about fighting the Vesians. And unlike his crippled cousin Ves, his genetics gifted him with sufficient aptitude to fulfill his dreams.

"Don't worry about me. Focus on doing your best in your own mech."

Ghanso went back to finishing his preparations. His Vhendra-S boasted fully charged energy cells and a robust cooling system to vent and store the rapid build-up of heat. This came at the cost of its armor and stealth. The Vhendra series had always been particularly vulnerable to getting locked on by Vesian heat-seeking missiles.

He only hoped that Alex would be able to shield him from the impending attacks.

Captain Rynsel spoke over the platoon channel. "Command is ordering us to standby along with the rest. Only the scouts are deployed so far. We're still waiting to see if the Vesians want to commit to the attack."

A general rule about space combat was that if both sides wanted to avoid combat, they had a million different ways to make it possible. Space was too big, and relative velocities sometimes reached absurd amounts that made it difficult for two different fleets to exchange a single volley.

Most times, a battle in space would only ensue if one force happened to be immobile and therefore vulnerable to attack.

This generally happened in two instances: when a fleet just transitioned from FTL to the edge of a star system, and when a fleet wanted to maintain orbital superiority over a planet, moon or any other object in space.

This time, the Mech Corps had to make a stand near the Glowing Planet. If they yielded control of the planet's skies, the Vesians would be able to bombard their ground forces with impunity.

While the groundside forces already made some headway into digging underground fortifications, they needed a lot more time to setup an effective, bombardment-proof bulwark.

Over the next two hours, the two fleets slowly danced around each other. Ghanso stared at the projection like a hawk, tracking the movements of the

various fleet elements. The Vesians had finally come close enough to identify their make-up.

"The vanguard consists of the Grand Chasers! They're fast buggers!"

The Grand Chasers had accrued something of a reputation, and was recognized by both the Vesians and the Brighters as one of the fastest spaceborn mech regiments in the region.

By putting out the Grand Chasers in front, the Vesians signalled that they wanted to test the waters first. The Republic's fleet moved in response, putting forth its lighter elements while keeping its heavier ships and mechs around the transports carrying their dimensional smoothers.

"They're deploying mechs!"

Over a hundred heavy mechs poured out into space. They arrayed themselves in a neat formation before readying their launchers.

"Detecting torpedo launches!"

Each mech launched a dozen torpedoes, all of which took up so much space that the heavy mechs became useless. In any case, the sole purpose of their existence was to circumvent the MTA's taboo of incorporating ship-grade weapons onto ships.

The sight of over twelve-hundred torpedoes burning towards the Vesian fleet sent a chill through Ghanso's back.

"Deploy now!" Captain Rynsel ordered. "Command wants us to help bring those torpedoes down! Don't wait for my orders once you get out. Just start shooting!"

"Hahahaha!" Old man Alex laughed. "What a way to start of the war! I hope your aim is decent, Larkinson, because the fleet carrier's survival is in your hands!"

Chapter 288 Grand Chasers

Vesians had a penchant of starting off any engagement with a massive missile barrage. The Bright Republic's pilots called it the Vesian Welcome Package.

At certain times, the massive Vesian opening salvos disintegrated their targets if they didn't bring enough countermeasures. Even if the defenders did bring enough guns, the chance of a couple of projectiles slipping through could never be eliminated.

Ghanso's Vhedra-S hastily emerged from the launch bay of the fleet carrier and flared its powerful flight systems forward in order to catch up with the formation of his squad.

Even under these dire circumstances, the mech pilots of the Volari Starhawks still maintained their discipline. The high levels of discipline, coordination and logistical support that underpinned the Mech Corps enabled it to wipe the floor with any gang or mercenary corps.

The pilots of the Starhawks followed their training and entered into a predetermined matrix formation that maximized each ranged mech's coverage so that they could spread out their anti-missile capabilities.

"Damn it. Why did they send torpedoes this time?"

Captain Rynsel passed down word from command on the comm channel.

"The incoming torpedoes are all old stock. They're using up their aging reserves first, so cheer up folks, because their ECM won't be as sophisticated as the newer ones.

"How old are we talking about?" Old Man Alex asked. "Are they like old-old, like last war surplus?"

"They're using a mix of torpedo designs from the interwar period, so they're not as obsolete as you think."

Ghanso took that as a serious warning not to rely too much on his targeting systems. A rifleman mech pilot like him didn't rely too much on outside aid anyway. While the Vhendra-S variant lacked a bit in extreme range precision, it should be able to make up for it when the torpedoes approached into terminal range.

"Larkinson, Don't forget we're facing torpedoes, not missiles." Lieutenant Fairfax spoke to the side as he brandished his ballistic rifle. "The Vesians design their torpedoes to be tough as hell. They can take a lot of hits and are practically impervious to low-intensity laser fire. It's best to switch to full-powered beams."

He already knew that, thank you. Ghanso already switches his rifle's mode before he even launched from the fleet carrier.

He looked through the optics of his Vhendra-S and stared at the black void of stars. In the distance, he saw nothing but the void, but his mech conveyed hundreds of approaching carriers from the Vesians.

Once he switched the mode of his HUD, the empty void of black lit up in a flare of pinpricks as his mech conveyed the sharks lurking far beyond his range of vision. The eternal night disappeared in a dazzlingly enchanting confluence of light and motion.

"The torpedoes are two minutes away! This is it, lads! Give 'em all you got!"

Only a few mechs among the Starhawks fired their weapons. Only the best sharpshooters had any realistic chance of hitting the torpedoes at this range. Even if everyone else relied on their targeting systems, the ECM and physical juking of the torpedoes ensured that most attempts ended in failure. It was better to hold back until the torpedoes came closer.

Blooms of anti-ballistic missiles flared to life from the midst of the Starhawks. Over ten-thousand small but potent missiles streaked towards the Vesian

torpedoes with nothing but their goal in mind. Despite the substantial amount of missiles, no one held up their hopes they could catch every torpedo.

The Vesians knew their missiles, and packed their torpedoes full with countermeasures of their own.

As the missiles curved to the side and followed an arcing intercept towards the incoming torpedoes, Ghanso finally received permission to let loose.

"Open fire!"

Ghanso held his mech absolutely still inside the formation and began to open fire with measured beams of lancing hot lasers. His mech didn't possess the sensors to see the result of his first salvo, but the collective observation capabilities of the ships backing up the mechs provided an accurate picture of what happened at the other side.

His initial laser volley hit the head of his targeted torpedo head-on but failed to take it out. The Vesians incorporated a lot of junk exotic alloys in the nose of their torpedoes, ensuring that they wouldn't fold in a single blow.

Fortunately, Ghanso didn't fight by himself. A mech pilot from another squad noted the damage sustained by the torpedo and delivered the coup-de-grace with his precision ballistic rifle. The torpedo's weakened nose couldn't withstand the sudden kinetic impact and its payload detonated in a powerful focused blast that had been designed to punch straight through thick layers of starship hull plating.

By this time, the anti-ballistic missiles they launched also reached the torpedoes. Both waves of projectiles engaged in an elaborate electronic battle as they tried to fool their opposites without getting fooled in turn.

Over three-hundred torpedoes perished outright and around two-hundred more suffered incidental damage to their exterior.

It wasn't enough.

As the torpedoes entered medium range, every mech with a gun opened fire. Even space knights like the one piloted by Old Man Alex fired back with their backup pistols.

Over half of the remaining torpedoes fell into quick succession. The closer range enabled mechs to worry less about accuracy and focus more on firing as fast as their heat management systems could handle the successive build-up of waste energy.

"They're getting close! Only less than three-hundred are left! Kill them now! For a brighter tomorrow!"

Every pilot echoed the slogan. "For a brighter tomorrow!"

A sense of sacred duty filled Ghanso's mind as he spoke those words. His aim grew steadier and his breath grew even as he methodically shot down torpedo after torpedo with the help of his fellow Starhawks.

The spirit of the Starhawks infused his neural connection between his brain and his mech and the two fought closer in sync. His Vhendra-S became an extension of his body as he utilized his substantial training to take down as many torpedoes as they entered their terminal mode.

"They're speeding up!"

The Vesian torpedoes always left the best for last. They kept a fourth of their energy reserves for the final sprint, burning it over the final seconds before impact to ensure a powerful and unavoidable collision for any bulky ship.

"Not enough." Ghanso gnarled as he sent a mental command to override his rifle's safeties. Heat leaked out from the built-in heatsinks in his rifle and warmed up the entire frame, but the Vhendra-S handled the weapon like a

machine gun, firing a succession of rapid full-powered laser beams at the rapidly accelerating torpedoes.

He only caught one torpedo while his colleagues destroyed over two-thirds of the torpedoes that made it this far.

"Here they come! Brace yourselves!"

Ghanso ceased his fire and huddles his mech into a ball to expose as little of its frame as possible.

The Republic's ECM successfully fooled twenty-six into hitting non-existent targets. They only found empty space in place of solid ships and detonated quickly after, dealing little damage as few ships had been in range of their concussive blasts.

That left seventeen torpedoes who found their marks. They all rammed into their chosen ships, punching deep into their hulls before detonating in highly devastating explosions that destroyed the smaller combat carriers outright while crippling the fleet carriers.

"The Harmony of Revel is gone!"

"Every person aboard the The Farchis Endymion is dead!"

"Feldman's Ire entire rear half has split apart! She's drifting out of formation!"

The Vesians reaped a terrible toll on the Starhawk fleet, and this was just the opening act. Ghanso became distracted by the cries for help that had somehow snuck their way into the command channels.

The Virulent Remedy had been the closest ship to Ghanso that had suffered a hit. It was a combat carrier, a medium-sized carrier built small and light enough to convey as much mechs to the surface of a planet as possible.

The Remedy didn't stand a chance. The torpedo bore straight through its outer hull before detonating right against its inner layers. The blast ripped

through a quarter of her compartments and outright tore apart several critical systems such as the bridge and life support.

A cascade of critical failures piled up in an instant that riddled the Virulent Remedy's tortured hull with scores of secondary explosions. Some of them reached her reactor and damaged its robust but ultimately helpless containment, causing the entire combat carrier to be lost in a massive blast of exotic and radioactive fury.

At least eight-hundred spacers lost their lives aboard the Virulent Remedy.

While a number of mechs and smaller vessels started rescue operations, the rest of the Starhawks readied themselves for the second round. The Grand Chasers hadn't been sitting idle while they launched all those torpedoes.

Captain Rynsel shook the younger pilots from their horror. "I know it looks bad, but the battle isn't over yet! Let the damage control teams take care of the mess. Focus on the enemy in front of you!"

In the next couple of minutes, the Volari Starhawks and the Grand Chasers shifted their formations in response to each other. The Grand Chasers followed an oblique trajectory that aimed to pass the flanks of the Vesian formation.

To be honest, they wouldn't be able to do much damage, but it galled the Mech Corps to remain passive when the Vesians made their firing pass. Thus, the Starhawks boosted away from their damaged ship to intercept the incoming Chasers.

"Alright folks, command wants us to make a single pass." Captain Rynsel spoke through the channel. "Stay in formation and hit the bastards straight in front of you. Don't get bogged down in dogfights and don't let your squad mates drift off in space if they're immobilized."

Neither the Chasers nor the Starhawks wanted to get entangled in a muddy dogfight at this stage. Any fight that got bogged down in space turned into vulnerable targets to both sides.

Ghanso's Vhedra-S boosted in line with his squad as he worked to cool his mech for the upcoming firing pass. His mech suffered substantial internal damage at the final moment due to all the excess heat and energy running through its systems.

He faced a minor dilemma on whether he should keep pushing his mech or conserve its integrity by holding back some power.

"This is merely the start. It's too early to go all-in."

The Vhedra-S slowly cooled down as Ghanso focused on venting as much heat as possible while lowering its overall output. By the time the Vhedra-S returned to a relatively normal condition, the Grand Chasers neared into effective range.

"Alright, lads! Here they come! Keep firing and keep moving. Don't ever stop!"

The two formations of mechs followed intricate arcing patterns as their squads followed trajectories meant to spoil the aim of anything that shot at them at long range.

Once they approached into closer range, thousands of mech started to open fire against each other.

This time, the Volari Starhawks gained the advantage. The Grand Chasers mostly consisted of lighter mechs. Without their heavy missileers, their formations lacked the punch of the more balanced composition of the Starhawks.

Many Starhawk mechs fell out of formation due to being picked out with focused fire. Each Vesian squad focusing on taking out one or two mechs at a time, thus allowing them to compensate for their relatively lighter armament.

Meanwhile, the Starhawks left the choice up to the pilots themselves, as they required less firepower to take out a fragile light mech. Ghanso still found it to be a challenge to actually land a hit against the agile light mechs, but once he succeeded in landing a shot, it often crippled the unlucky target.

"Larkinson! They're shifting fire to you! Dirge, cover him!"

A volley of ballistic fire streamed past the frame of his mech, pulling him out of his target fixation. Ghanso knew he was in trouble and started juking around like hyperactive monkey.

"Stop bouncing around and get behind me!" Old Man Alex shouted as his space knight valiantly positioned itself in front of the Vhedra-S before it could suffer significant damage. "Stay calm and fire over my shoulder!"

Ghanso had forgotten himself for a moment. He grew angry for his disgraceful behavior and poured his vengeance into his rifle, firing right back at his attackers as they tried to get past the space knight's meaty shield.

"Hahaha! The Grand Chasers don't have the weight to get past my shield!"

The space knight fared well against the Chasers. Their skinny rifles and cannons hardly dented Alex's shield.

"They're getting close!" Lieutenant Fairfax reminded everyone. "Watch your angles and don't get hit from behind!"

Seconds passed as the two formations meshed through each other. A chaotic flurry of shots and hits exchanged in rapid tempo as the Starhawks and the Chasers merged together before breaking apart in the opposite directions.

"I got hit!" Ghanso gritted his teeth as his mech spun away from formation.
"My flight system is inoperable. It got hit by debris from the rear!"

Chapter 289 Apparition

Ghanso Larkinson suffered from an unlucky sequence of events. The Vesians hadn't been able to get past Alex's space knight, so they turned their firepower to an unprotected mech from a nearby squad.

The Starhawk mech in question hadn't expected to be targeted by an entire Vesian squad. The knight in his squad was already shielding another squad mate, so the targeted mech lacked any form of support.

The mech blew up as soon as its pilot ejected into the distance. Some of the shards of the exploded mech happened to have hit Ghanso's mech from behind, thereby dealing significant damage to its fragile flight system

The damage hadn't been extensive, but it took a long time for the flight system to regain its functionality. As Ghanso halted the uncontrolled spin, he looked back to the Starhawk formation to see how well they fared.

"Overall, they held up better than the Grand Chasers. The Starhawks suffered relatively few casualties, but most of the affected mechs had to be written off due to the intensive amount of firepower they sustained.

Even Alex's space knight had its shield chewed up at the end, causing his mech to endure the final volleys on its frontal armor.

"Don't look at me. I'm fine. This is all in a day's work for a space knight."

As the Grand Chasers arced their way back to their own fleet, the Volari Starhawks started to police the battlefield. They turned their formation around and methodically recovered the wrecks while rescuing mech pilots from both sides.

No matter how heated the war between the Vesians and the Brighters got, they quietly maintained a couple of basic rules of conduct. The most important

of which was to take prisoners whenever they could and exchange them with each other at a later date.

It helped the two sides conserve their most precious and limited resources, which were trained and capable mech pilots. Such agreements hadn't always been the norm, but after several generations of endless rivalry, both sides saw the need to civilize their conflict in order to prevent their neighbors from casting their aspirations upon them once they exhausted most of their manpower at the end of another war.

Eventually, Ghanso's Vhendra-S had to be hauled back to the fleet carrier. Her hangars had become stuffed with mechs as she welcomed an influx of homeless mechs who lost their original berths aboard the ships targeted by the torpedoes.

Ghanso felt a little bad about the engagement. Any excitement about being a part of the first formal action between the Bright Republic and the Vesia kingdom had disappeared.

"Did we lose the battle?"

"It's hard to say." Old Man Alex replied as he zipped down from the cockpit of his beaten mech. The space knight looked like it had taken a stroll through a micrometeor storm. Its frame showed off lots of smaller impact marks. "The Grand Chasers underestimated us. We took out more mechs from our firing pass, and we've been able to capture every living Vesian trapped alive in their cockpits."

"Yeah, but we lost so many ships."

"It could have been worse. Twelve-hundred torpedoes is nothing special. Wait until they gather an entire division and throw out a wave of ten-thousand torpedoes. You'll really taste despair at that point."

In terms of war materiel, the Vesians clearly won the exchange. They took out seventeen ships at the cost of a lot of expensive but ultimately disposable torpedoes.

Yet all was not in vain. The Grand Chasers ships and mechs had to extend past the Vesian lines in order to perform their attack, which made them vulnerable to pursuit. After expending so much torpedoes and mechs, the exhausted Chasers had suddenly become the prey as another regiment of the 4th division initiated pursuit.

Both sides started to maneuver for control over orbit. Regiments shifted around like chess pieces across a large and intricate three-dimensional chess board.

Orbital mechanics played a critical role in the defense of the Glowing Planet. The 4th division took advantage of their proximity to the gravity well by slingshotting their fleet elements to hasten their maneuvers over the Glowing Planet's orbit.

The battle turned into a murky slog. Its outcome still remained in question.

Down on the surface, Ves didn't know one of his cousins experienced combat against the Vesians for the first time. The lack of bandwidth of their ground-side camps limited communication between the forces on the ground and the forces in space to a handful of often-repeated codes. Personal correspondence had no chance of making it through.

Right now, Ves oversaw the final adjustments to the mechs that enabled them to operate despite carrying bundles of bombs inside their frames. The last batch of normal energy cells had fully turned into overcharged ones by the capricious energy field emitted by the Glowing Planet.

After their initial horror passed, a sense of resignation overtook the Whalers. They pretty much accepted that they had to continue piloting their mechs and hope nothing struck their energy cells.

One of the mechs that had been affected happened to be Melkor's Stanislaw. Melkor hadn't made much waves ever since he touched down on the surface. Rather than enter the cockpit, Melkor instead aided the Whalers by shoring up their feeble electronic systems against enemy intrusion.

"How's their information security coming along?"

"Well enough that they'll hold against pirates." Melkor replied as he leaned against the foot of his Stanislaw. "I don't think it'll last more than a second against any Vesian hacking attempts. The Whalers are better off pulling the plugs from their connected systems."

"Sounds awful, but not unexpected. If you've seen the kind of mechs the Whalers are using, you'll realize that the Vesians don't even need to bother with hacking their systems. They can just overrun the entire base."

It felt refreshing for Ves to talk with someone other than a Whaler. Every member of the gang somehow fell into the delusion that they could put up a decent fight against a trained military mech force.

"So what did you do to my Stanislaw?"

"I added some compartments to the Stanislaw's internal architecture. Your energy cells are placed in a separate box, as it were. It won't prevent your mech from being wrecked if they happened to blow up, but it will increase the odds you'll survive. I've beefed up the armor of your cockpit to make sure you'll make it out alive."

Melkor nodded in satisfaction. "That sounds good, but I know my Stanislaw. It doesn't have much space for all of those things you mentioned."

"That's right. I opted to remove a couple of energy cells and some redundant components. Your Stanislaw won't last as long in the field and it's also a little more fragile to being crippled. Regardless, I think it's better to trade these off in exchange for not getting killed in an instant if an enemy happens to hit your energy cells."

Ves only had time to modify one mech at once. The mech technicians lacked the extensive body of knowledge to develop their own modifications. A few of them had already tried to do so behind his back, and every mech that suffered from their ministrations had turned into safety hazards.

When Walter demanded that Ves modify the Whaler mechs to be less susceptible to abrupt explosions, he demanded he start first with his cousin's mech. At the very least, he wouldn't be worrying about Melkor while he sat in the makeshift workshop trying to turn a bunch of rotten ingredients into serviceable meals.

"You know, you told me once that you entered into the Mech Corps after graduating from an advanced academy. Why did you leave?"

"I didn't leave. I was forced out of their rolls at the end of my orientation."

Melkor's tone made it clear he didn't want to talk about it, but the issue had always been nagging at Ves.

"Did you get into a fight, or did you piss off a superior or something?"

"Let's just say I found out something I shouldn't have when I took my hacking hobby a little too far."

Melkor could have uncovered anything from classified documents to illicit dealings from his superiors. Ves had an imaginative mind and ran through dozens of possibilities in quick succession.

"Well, you didn't get killed or anything, so it must not have been something critical enough to earn the ire of the Larkinsons."

Maybe Melkor simply got his hands of some nude recordings or something. Ves tried to stifle his laugh as he finished putting the Stanislaw back together. Once he affixed the final plate, he floated down to the ground and stretched his body.

"It's all done now. Make sure to keep facing the enemy from the front. I know you rifleman have a tendency to turn your mechs to the side sometimes, but try to avoid that because it will expose the side and rear armor to the enemy. I haven't been able to do much with those."

"That's already enough." Melkor clapped Ves on the shoulder. "I'll get back on patrol to get used to the modifications. You stay safe, Ves."

He had a whole line of mechs waiting to be modified, starting with Walter's incredible Urman.

As a mech designer, Ves enjoyed digging into the guts of any remarkable designs, and the Urman offered plenty of excitement. Yet he also harbored some reservations about going through every mech one by one in order to make them more impervious against incidental damage that could set off their energy cells.

"It's going to be an awful slog."

Ves had no one to blame for himself for signing up to this expedition. He got exactly what he wanted, and he already earned a significant share from the income the Whalers expected to earn from their mining gains.

It was too bad that their current location didn't offer as much riches as their old location. The Mech Corps chose to establish their ground-side fortifications in the middle of the most defensive terrain within the red zones. They dragged

their allies such as the Blood Claws with them, and in turn the Blood Claws forced the Whalers to take up one of the most awful locations at the flank.

The ever-present green glow had been covered by a grey, soot-filled smoke cloud. Small but annoying vents littered the jagged cliffs and ancient hills that made up this portion of the Glowing Planet. Merely moving from one side of the camp to the other posed a significant challenge due to the substantial amount of deep cracks in the ground.

One careless pilot even fell into the gap with his mech. Its legs had been flattened to pieces while the pilot sustained significant impact injuries. Everyone learned their lesson from that point and made sure to cross the gaps from the ramps placed on top of them. It all seemed tentative and fragile to Ves.

"Where's Lucky?"

He hadn't been paying too much attention to Lucky lately. His mood turned grumpy ever since Ves took him away from the riches laying on the ground at their old location.

This time, Ves installed a powerful tracking device around Lucky's collar, so his comm picked up the signal from further away. Ves donned his hazard suit and left the protected confines of the workshop. He followed the directional markings until he came across his gem cat who had just finished gorging on a lump of valuable exotics.

"There you are. Let me take a look at you."

Ves carefully handled his cat and took a closer look at Lucky's exterior. Over the past couple of days, his pet had undergone a metamorphosis of sorts. While he still remained level two, his overall quality had went up quite a bit.

Physically, that came into being by shifting his energy lines from blue to green, which matched the shade of the planet's glow. Once Lucky's glow had reached its saturation point, his exterior plating started to change as well.

"Your plates are paler than last time. Are you turning into a silvery substance?"

"Meow."

Lucky behaved awfully nonchalant despite undergoing fundamental changes in his physical makeup. It worried Ves a bit that he didn't know whether the changes benefited his pet or not. He currently leaned on the changes being beneficial because he didn't think that Lucky's remarkable design could be brought down so easily.

"So have you been turning your senses to sniff out the core of the Glowing Planet?"

"Meow." Lucky bobbed his head side-to-side in a very clear no.

"Damn. Do I actually have to find a way to dig past the crust of this planet in order to get my hands on a so-called core?"

The System's mission put a sense of urgency behind his stay with the Whalers. He doubted the gang possessed the hardware to dig that deep into this dangerous planet. He'd have to find a way to attach himself with a more capable force, such as the Blood Claws or the Mech Crops.

"The Whalers won't last long enough to maintain their own camp anyway."

He already planned his exit from their midst. The sheer amount of incompetence that hobbled the Whalers would bite them back in the end.

None of this mattered for the moment. It would take some time for the Vesians or the pirates or any scum to land their forces on the ground. Even then, they might not clash immediately, as every force would be scrambling to take up

every available spot of land before they thought about contesting some of the more promising occupied regions.

Lucky suddenly turned stiff. He hissed at something behind Ves.

"What's wrong, buddy?"

Ves turned around to see a sight he had never thought to see again in his life.

"Mother?"

His mother stood before him in the flesh. Even as his rational mind yelled at him that he'd been caught in a hallucination induced by the Glowing Planet, his emotions went out of control, scrambling him into paralysis.

"It can't be you. You're dead!"

"Vesssssss." The apparition of his mother hissed. "You are so handsome now. You're all grown up."

The image of his mother flickered closer until she stood right in front of him. The back of her hand brushed his cheek. Despite wearing a hazard suit, the translucent hand went right past the helmet as if it didn't exist and began to caress his skin.

Ves felt his skin deform as the chilly hand physically pushed and stroked his smooth skin. Tears fell out of his eyes. Whether his eyes grew moist due to his abject fear or his yearnings for his mother, he didn't know. He couldn't even move. Somehow, his body ceased to follow his instructions.

"Mother. You're dead. Your grave, I visited it last year!"

"Is that what you believe?" His mother shook his head. "Life and death are interconnected, Ves. One cannot truly die."

Her reality-warping hand trailed down his neck and followed his arm until it reached his comm. "I see you've been making use of your father's present."

"You know about the System?!"

His mother smiled at him in amusement. "You are always so impatient, my little Vessie. Have you been drinking enough tea lately?"

"Mother, answer the question please!"

The faded form of his mother suddenly disappeared from his sight. One moment, she hovered in front of him, smothering him with motherly affection like she always did when he was young. In the next, her image vanished out of existence, as if the Glowing Planet deliberately roused his hopes only to crush them underneath the heel of its booth.

"MOTHER!"

Chapter 290 Spreading A Ne

They say that dead men tell no tales. His mother didn't reveal anything either about the System.

Ves had become awfully spooked after meeting his long-dead mother. He clearly felt as if his mother was real, but that couldn't be. She was dead.

"I'm hallucinating, just like those other folks. She's not real. She's a figment of my imagination."

He struggled inwardly to convince himself that he imagined the whole sequence. Only one thing forced him to admit that it might not have stayed inside his head.

He turned to Lucky. "You saw that, didn't you?"

His cat kept up a wary posture, as if he encountered an extremely dangerous predator. Ves had the sense that Lucky had definitely shared his experiences.

With that confirmation, Ves didn't know what to think. Did the Glowing Planet toy with him? Did the planet possess some highly energetic exotic that was

capable of manipulating spacetime? Why did he encounter mother, and not someone else?

Too many questions swirled in his mind, but without a solid understanding of what happened to him, it was useless to speculate any further.

"Another incident to add to the growing pile of mysteries surrounding my life."

With a harried mind, Ves returned to the fortified camp with Lucky in his arms. His cat had been so spooked by the encounter that he didn't resist being picked up. Apparently, he lost his voracious appetite, which was a first.

Once he returned to confines of Walter's Whalers, Ves declined to report the incident and tried to go back work. He went to the workshop that held the partially disassembled Urman mech and removed his bulky hazard suit before approaching the Urman.

The mech looked huge and strong as always. Ves admired its robust construction and how much care its designer had put into strengthening the arms.

Walter approached from the side. "The Urman's been with me for more than a decade. While I don't know how the fiddly stuff works, I can tell you that there's hardly anyone who's more familiar with the Urman than me. I don't think there's more than forty of these mechs in circulation, and I'm sure that most of them have been scrapped by now."

"Is it because it's difficult to fight with a brawler mech?"

"Oh, more than you can imagine. The only way the Urman can withstand a sword or a spear is to block them with its heavy gauntlets. While they're powerful and open up a lot of options, they also slow down your arms and they're really expensive to maintain."

Ves already figured out the Urman came with such a trade-off. Those disposable gauntlets weighed as much if not more than a typical mech-sized sword and shield. This gave them an amazing amount of thickness and endurance, but it didn't help the brawler mech's speed.

Any mech pilot crazy enough to pilot a brawler had to be a natural wrestler and fistfighter to be qualified to pilot such a strange type of mech.

He started to listen to Walter describe in his own words how he saw the Brawler. Despite his many faults, Walter had been gifted with a talent for brawling, and he honed his street fighting skills by taking formal classes back when he joined a gang in Bentheim.

The gang leader didn't ruminate on his stay in Bentheim and turned his story back to his mech.

"The Urman is a great mech, but it's a difficult one to pilot as well. The mech designer who sold me the Urman went bankrupt soon after. He must be regretting that he designed a brawler mech in the first place."

"Why did you go for a brawler instead of a more conventional mech like a knight or a swordsman mech?"

"Oh, I've tried those mechs. I've tried to find the right mech plenty of times. They didn't click me. It's like I'm being stuffed into the wrong body. Those knights are useless without their armaments and the swordsman mechs rely too much on their swords. All the time I've piloted those standard mechs, I always felt less of a man."

Walter's discussion about his mech was fascinating to Ves. Hearing about his experiences successfully cleansed his fright and allowed him to forget his brief but frightening encounter with the apparition of his mother.

"Alright, I think I've gained an understanding of your Urman." Ves nodded in satisfaction. "Let's move on to what you want to change. Since I'm overhauling your mech, I might as well be thorough."

"I don't know." Walter appeared serious as he considered the matter carefully. "I'm already used to how it's built right now. There's hardly anything that stands out that I want done. It's not the best mech, but it's mine."

"Mechs like these won't be able to maintain a constant level of performance, especially if they are older than a decade. There must be something that you're annoying with. It could be something that worked fine at the start, but became increasingly more annoying over the years."

"Now that I think about it, I've always been wondering about the left elbow joint. It's just a little bit less supple than the other one. My mech technicians say it's fine, but maybe it's starting to break down."

After jogging his memory, Walter listed over two-dozen pet peeves. Some of them sounded trivial to the point where Ves doubted a mechanical problem had been the case, but Ves noted them all down anyway. Once he got his list, he gathered a couple of mech technicians and got to work.

Dismantling the Urman, designing new modifications and implementing them on an existing frame proved to be a stimulating job to Ves. Over the course of several days, he became immersed in trying to understand this rare and exotic brawler mech.

With each puzzle solved, Ves gained another insight into the operation of heavier mechs. Although the Urman hadn't reached that particular threshold, it operated along the same principles as an orthodox heavy mech while retaining a couple of key features of a medium mech.

As Ves went about his days, the universe around him moved on.

The Whalers dug out a decent underground refuge and finished putting up some rudimentary defenses.

The Blood Claws used their extensive manpower and sophisticated equipment to establish a fort.

Meanwhile, the Mech Corps that neighbored them both formed an even larger defensive position that could withstand a couple of Vesian regiments at once, for a time.

It could be seen that the Whalers presented nothing but a feeble obstacle to any but the most pathetic raids. In the face of a determined invasion, their only role should be to buy enough time for the Blood Claws and the 4th division to gather up their ground-side mechs.

Such an attack could come at any time, especially since the battle in space turned chaotic.

After the initial skirmishers, the Brighters and the Vesians lost their appetite for more engagements. Their numbers closely matched each other, which meant that a battle would be too close to call. They didn't have any reason to retreat but neither did they have a compelling urge to attack.

The goal of the Bentheim fleet remained protecting their ground-side assets. They placed a significant amount of ships in geosynchronous orbit over their red zone.

The Vesians responded by claiming the red zone directly opposite on the other side of the Glowing Planet. They placed some ships in geosynchronous orbit as well and started landing lots of landbound assets.

When Ves heard about what happened, he wasn't too surprised by their actions. "The planet is still big enough to fit the Vesians. What's more important is what will happen when the other guests arrive."

By this time, the massive pirate armada led by the mysterious Dragons of the Void almost made its way to the Glowing Planet. The frontier pirate group's unexpected capabilities had allowed them to get close without being affected by the Glowing Planet's incidental hazards.

Ghanso sat quietly in his mech. The mech technicians already fixed up his Vhedra-S in the past few days. Now, he sat on standby while he waited for the Vesians or the pirates to make a move.

"What do you think the pirates are up to?" Old man Alex chattered over the comm. "If they arrive just like this, won't they be provoking both us and the Vesians?"

"Beats me." Ghanso shrugged. "I heard that they're not even using dimensional smoothers to suppress the gravitic anomalies around them. It's clear the Dragons made a lot of preparations. I can't help but think they're up to something."

"I've got that feeling as well."

The pirates mainly possessed converted carriers. None of them matched the capabilities of the combat carriers of the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion. They also didn't bring anything that could match the giant fleet carriers either.

What the incoming fleet lacked in quality, they made up for it in quantity. The main job of a carrier was to convey their mechs from one destination to the next. In that, the converted carriers did their job.

Even if the military forces of both states had the edge in mechs and training, they still felt apprehensive about facing so many mechs. The amount of resources the Dragons expended to maintain such a gathering of ships must be through the roof.

Besides the pirates, the mercenaries also posed a threat. The mercenary lords who refused to work for the Bright Republic must have thought they

could get a better deal if they joined the side of the ultimate winners of the battle over control of the Glowing Planet.

Lieutenant Fairfax interrupted their musings. "Captain Rynsel has just received word of caution from command. They think the pirate fleet will be trying to bypass our forces land as much mechs as possible before we chase them off."

"Can we stop them?" Ghanso asked.

"Not really. Even with the help of the Vesians, we won't be able to stop so many pirate carriers from descending onto the surface and unload their mechs. They've got too many ships."

Everyone's faces turned grim. They waited for a couple of hours until the pirate swarm almost reached the planet.

"Alright men, this is it! Launch and gather around me!"

The mechs assigned to Captain Rynsel emerged from the fleet carrier in pairs. They formed up around her in a double chevron formation before flying outwards to their assigned coordinates. Ghanso noticed that these coordinates brought him closer to the Glowing Planet.

"This is our sector. Our orders are to hover in orbit and wait for the pirate fleet to arrive and disperse. Any pirate mech or ship that passes through our sector should be destroyed before they make landfall."

"What should we prioritize, ma'm?"

"Take out the descending carriers if you can. Any mech that passes through us will be spaceborn mechs that won't be of much use on the ground. It's better to focus on the carriers first. Even the smallest ones will be carrying five to seven mechs."

Ghanso waited for arrival of the pirate fleet while the Mech Corps arrayed its forces into a net that covered close to a third of the globe.

"Here they come! They're already splitting up!"

As predicted, the fleet led by the Dragons of the Void avoided a fruitless battle over orbital supremacy. Instead, they decided to focus on the real prize, which was the Glowing Planet and its many resources.

Large numbers of spaceborn mechs emerged from the pirate ships. All of them flew forward in order to lead the charge and spoil the aims of Ghanso and the other defenders as best as possible.

"They're spreading out their mechs! They shouldn't be aiming to take us out. Don't get distracted by their antics. They don't have the guts to fly close to us!"

Ghanso calmed his mind and sought to establish a deeper connection with his mech. Last time, he faced an enormous torpedo wave followed by a single pass of the Grand Chasers. Facing a bunch of pirates shouldn't be as nerve-racking, although their sheer numbers made him grow a little pale.

"They're just rabble. They're nothing special. I can take them out by the dozens."

The pirate fleet began their orbital insertion.