

### Chapter 291 Raining Pirates

The battle against the pirates erupted in a mass of chaos and individual action. The Volari Starhawks and the other regiments had spread themselves thin, and that had forced the pirates to disperse as well.

The Dragons of the Void could have chosen to concentrate their ships and mech, but that would have allowed the Mech Corps to close the envelope and trap them in each direction. They decided it was better to remain elusive at all fronts.

All of this meant that Ghanso and his squad members only faced a couple of mechs at a time. Ghanso methodically shot at the approaching mechs with his laser rifle set to medium. He didn't require any more power to take out half-rusted mechs that looked second-hand at best.

"Incoming ship! She looks like she's carrying at least eight landbound mechs! Forget about the small fry and take her out!"

Ghanso switched his target in a heartbeat and opened fire on the incoming carrier. His laser shots merely scratched the coating of the immense ship, so he cranked up his laser rifle until it released beams as thick as the arm of his mech.

His super-heated laser beam did almost nothing to the frontal cone of the carrier. "My lasers aren't doing anything to the ship!"

"My rifle bullets are bouncing off the cone!"

Captain Rynsel made a risky decision. "Cease fire on the carrier and resume targeting her escort mechs. Once the carrier passes us by, try to hit if from behind."

They exchanged fire with the escorts which drew closer, but Ghanso had a hard time landing any hits due to their speeds. He lost his previous calm when frustration started to creep in. Why couldn't he hit any mechs?

One of the pirate mechs swiveled his rifle and spat out a volley of explosive shells at his Vhedra-S. Old Man Alex moved his mech in front of Ghanso and shielded him from the blast.

"Get a hold of yourself, Larkinson! You're overheating your rifle!"

He cursed as he noticed the build-up of heat. If he continued firing at this pace, he'd hardly have anything left once the pirate ship passed by their squad. Ghanso stopped his fire entirely in order to allow his rifle to cool as fast as possible.

"This isn't the first time you lost your mind!" Old Man Alex admonished him as he moved away to shield another squad mate. "Whatever crap you're dealing with, it's not as important as the mission! Everyone is counting on you to do your job, so do it!"

Ghanso growled in frustration, but kept his opinion to himself. Alex had been right that he should be focusing on his mission instead of letting his emotions dictate his actions. Overheating his rifle early would only benefit the pirates instead of their own side.

Even as his instincts yelled at him to take down the pirate mechs, Ghanso remained fixated on the incoming carrier. Now that the pirate ship neared their position, he noticed that her dull black coating had a surprisingly thick frontal cone made out of random plates of scavenged mech armor.

"Damn. How many mechs worth of armor plating does this carrier have?"

"More than ten I bet. These plates must be the refuse that had been dislodged from their original mechs."

Despite their damaged state, the plates possessed enough integrity to withstand most of the attack sent in their way. Their thickness prompted Captain Rynsel to give up taking out the carrier from the front. Instead, they all waited until the ship came close.

"Get ready to turn around and shoot at the rear!"

Five, for, three, two, one, "Open fire!"

Not every member of the squad could open fire on the carrier. For some reason, the escort mechs turned berserk and assaulted the closest Starhawk mech they could find. Alex and a couple of other melee mech pilots raced to the rescue while Ghanso focused on the thrusters of the descending carrier.

He took a deep breath and released a penetrating laser beam. Its seconds-long burn hit the rear of the carrier but did practically no damage.

Thrusters had been built to absorb a lot of heat, so the laser beam didn't do much damage. Ghanso shook his head and shifted his aim, though the rapidly widening distance made it hard for him to focus on a single section of the ship. He quickly fired again before the ship flew out of range.

This time his lasers glanced off the side of the carrier. Despite the near miss, his laser happened to strike a less heat-resistant part of the ship. His highly potent laser beam melted through the armor and damaged a couple of compartments, though none of them seemed important.

Nevertheless, the opening made by his lasers prompted his squad mates to focus on that vulnerability. Together, they widened the hole in the carrier and inflicted increasingly severe internal damage.

A final explosive shell landed deep within the ship and destabilized her power reactor. The ship lost control and spin uncontrollably.

"She's dead! Good job!" Captain Rynsel praised.

If the ship lost her power, her inertial dampeners would quickly drain their meager reserves. Once that happened, the occupants of the ship would have no way of protecting themselves against the g-forces induced by the ship's decent and uncontrollable spin. Everybody's body would undergo an experience akin to a blender. Their bodies didn't stand a chance.

"Eyes up! Two more ships are passing through our sector! If they've got a strengthened cone as well, then wait until they pass us!"

Neither ship turned out to be as abnormal as the first one. Ghanso and his squad comfortably blew up one ship, but they didn't spare enough firepower to take out the other one. Even as they shot at the rear of the surviving carrier, her mech escorts plunged into their midst, forcing them to deal with them first while the remaining pirate ship got away.

This pattern repeated over and over over the entire globe. Even the Vesians dropped their vigilance against the Mech Corps in order to prevent the pirates from gaining a foothold on the planet.

Both the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion soon found out they underestimated the resolve of the pirates. Many pirate mechs that accompanied their carriers towards the surface recklessly entered into mortal combat against the defenders that made up the net. They attacked with no regards to their lives and always fought to the death.

Though costly, the distraction worked. Ghanso lost track of how many dinky carriers passed by their squad as they tried to fend off the latest wave of suicidal pirate mechs.

"Since when did pirates fight to the death?!"

"Beats me! Pirates aren't the smartest bunch of people in the first place!"

"My ammo is running low! I'm all out of high explosive shells!"

"My energy reserves are dipping as well!" Ghanso reported. Even at the lowest settings, the rate at which he fired off his beams had led to an inevitable drain on his energy cells.

Sometimes he wished his mech suffered from the overcharge phenomenon, but it appeared the Glowing Planet only affected mechs closer to its surface. Just in case, the mech technicians had overridden the power safeties of each mech, but it hadn't been necessary for now.

Down on the surface of the Glowing Planet, Ves just finished affixing back the last piece of plating on the Urman. "Your mech is back in one piece, Walter."

"Took you long enough." The big man gruffed as he zipped up to his cockpit. "Don't wander off. It's going to get dangerous soon."

As Ves watched the Urman come online and move out of the workshop, he felt a little lost. Due to the pirate incursion, Ves had been forced to curtail his extensive rework of the Urman and rush to put the mech back together.

"I could have learned much more if the pirates didn't chose to drop from above." He sighed with regret.

He picked up Lucky who had been staying alertly by his side as if he expected an imminent attack.

"Do you sense the pirates approaching from above?"

"Meow."

Lucky certainly became more perceptive ever since he gorged himself to the mineral wealth of the Glowing Planet. His exterior had turned into a soft and pliable silvery alloy, but Ves had no doubt that its toughness surpassed the previous bronze-like exterior.

"Well Lucky, let's go up to the roof. I'm not content with holing up in this workshop."

Ves didn't want to cower in the face of the pirates. He walked over to where he stored his hazard suit and put it on in record time before he raced up to a lifter platform that brought him to the upper ramps. There, he found a secured entryway to the roof which Ves easily opened with the access codes he received from the Whalers.

Once he stepped outside, he watched at the blinking lights falling down from orbit. The lack of air meant the mechs and ships descended without the pesky build-up of friction and heat. This made it rather difficult for Ves to spot the descending pirates with the naked eye.

He had to establish a connection with the base's sensor net, which had to borrow the telemetry sent out by the Blood Claws and the Mech Corps before they could make out how many pirates fell from the sky.

His helmet visor bloomed with menacing purple icons. The sunless sky over Ves alone contained over fifty falling mech carriers. Occasionally, the space around them flashed as the pirate mechs fought back against the forces of the Mech Corps trying to stop their descent.

"Too many ships are making it through." He determined.

Only a fifth of the carriers encountered a mishap as the various spaceborn regiments of the Mech Corps feebly tried to catch as many pirates as they could.

Ves didn't blame the Mech Corps for their failure. Unlike them, he knew how many cannon fodder the Dragons of the Void were willing to sacrifice in order to advance their goals.

A spread of seven different pirate vessels happened to aim their trajectory close towards their position. As the collective sensor net refined their readings, they even determined their most probable landing zones.

One medium-sized pirate carrier happened to land a short distance away from this camp. Despite their threat, Ves remained in place. A single carrier shouldn't be able to convey enough mechs to threaten the Whalers.

The anticipation within him grew bigger as the carrier descended into visual range. Amidst the ever-present green glow, the underbelly of the pirate ship reflected back the light as if it was a star.

Alarms rang out throughout the base as the anti-air turrets oriented their barrels towards the incoming carrier. After sounding out a final warning, the turrets thrummed as they shot laser beams after laser beams at the incoming pirate ship.

The carrier happened to be a sturdier specimen from the rest. Her underbelly bore the laser beams without buckling. Each beam only left shallow furrows into the armored hull.

A couple of turrets that fired kinetic projectiles opened fire after that. This time, they left deeper scars, but the sturdy carrier endured the rain of projectiles until it whooshed past their line of sight and landed a fair distance away behind some jagged cliffs and hills.

For a moment, the base fell silent. The turrets returned to standby once their targets left their line of sights. Meanwhile, Walter, Fadah and the other leaders fell into a quick discussion on what to do next.

Ves wasn't privy to their conversation, but he didn't need to make a guess because they already went into action. A couple of squads led by Fadah and some other cadre exited the base and cautiously approached the landing site of the carrier.

He approved of their action. The mechs and pilots inside the carrier must be suffering from the aftereffects of their crash-like landing. Even if the ship had

survived the entry onto the Glowing Planet, that didn't mean the carrier had made it out unscathed.

Ves patched into a private feed he surreptitiously added to the Blackbeak's systems. His helmet visor shimmered before it began to transmit the Blackbeak's view. He wanted to get a first-hand view of the Blackbeak's upcoming performance. He especially wanted to determine whether Fadah could cope with all the changes he demanded from Ves.

"Don't screw up, Fadah."

### Chapter 292 Rush

Walter, Fadah and the rest of the most experienced Whalers approached the landing site with haste.

From the sensor readings and their own observations, they knew that the pirate ship sustained a lot of damage and had been forced to descend in a controlled crash.

Different from an uncontrolled crash, the carrier and her occupants survived the impact. However, that didn't mean they regained their senses immediately.

Walter might not be a genius in administrative matters, but he had a good sense for combat. He wanted to seize the initiative and take out the pirates before they could muster a proper defense.

Due to the haste involved in this decision, Walter had to let the faster mechs go ahead, leaving his Urman to catch up from the rear. Fadah's modified Blackbeak showed its new strength in this moment. The slimmed-down medium mech caught up with the jogging light mechs without issue.

"The landing site is five kilometers away. We should spread out and cover the flanks."

The light mechs split apart without any further acknowledgement. Everyone understood each other due to the camaraderie they forged over a span of decades.

While the light mechs covered the flanks, the mainstay medium mechs took the lead and approached the dormant carrier from her rear. The ship dug a deep furrow into the craggy ground, leading to a messy stop at the foot of an obsidian cliff.

"The carrier is radiating a lot of heat. My sensors are going haywire from all of the junk. We don't know what's inside."

That prompted the mechs to approach the carrier with a little caution. Fadah and the others waited until Walter's Urman emerged from behind. He took one good look at the downed ship before issuing a command.

"What are you afraid of? It's a sitting duck right now! Shoot at it?"

"But boss, don't you want to salvage the ship? That's a medium-sized carrier!"

"Who cares about a half-wrecked ship! A couple of containers worth of junk exotics is a lot more valuable than this carrier. Shoot!"

The Whalers brought a handful of rifleman mechs and a single cannoneer. All of them unleashed their firepower on the static vessel.

The rifles only dealt shallow damage to the hull, but the ballistic cannon tore through the hull armor like a dog chewing through bone.

The alarming damage from the cannon prompted the pirates inside to action. Despite the hard landing, their mech pilots had all been safely ensconced in their landbound mechs. When they blasted open the hatch, they showed very little signs of losing their wits. They poured out of the carrier and fired back at the Whalers.

"They set a trap for us!"

"Calm down! They're out in the open and they don't outnumber us!"

The Whalers had spread out in a half-moon around the crash site. Furthermore, their mechs all took cover behind some sturdy rocks and hills, preventing the pirates from dealing any effective damage.

The pirates obviously realized that and shifted directions. If they charged down the middle, they'd be surrounded on all sides. Thus, they chose to charged towards the extreme left of the formation.

"Cycle clockwise!"

The Whalers dynamically adjusted their formation in return. They spun the moon so that the pirates would be forced to cash against Walter's Urman in a frontal clash.

By then, it was too late for the pirate commander to change his mind. The pirates committed to the charge, shooting at the Urman with their ranged weapons while brandishing their melee weapons to finish the bulky mech up close.

The Urman stoically withstood the impacts, having crossed its arms to let its thick armored gauntlets take the brunt of the blows.

On the pirate side, two swordsman mechs and one knight led the charge. As for the Whalers, they continued to maneuver from the sides in order to envelop the pirates. For this to succeed, Walter had to blunt the charge of the pirates by himself. He grinned inside his cockpit.

"COME!" He roared as he urged his Urman to lumber forward, building up momentum for the double fists it prepared to unleash.

The knight in front sheathed its sword and held its shield with both arms. The Urman looked like it could pack a mean punch, and the pirate mech didn't think it could withstand a lunging strike with a single arm.

"TOO FLIMSY!"

The Urman outright shattered the shield, pushing the knight back and taking it out of the action for a few seconds. The swordsman mechs that came right after slashed forth with their swords, only to be caught by the Urman's heavy gauntlets.

One pirate had been smart enough to let go of his sword, but the other pilot stubbornly clung to his only weapon. Walter grinned and pulled the sword forward, which forced the mech that held an iron grip on the handle to stumble closer.

That was a fatal mistake.

The Urman let go of the words and wrapped the vulnerable knight in a clapping bear hug that squished its outer frame. Its heavy gauntlets dug into the thinner rear armor until they pried open the armor plating. After ripping open the rear armor, the Urman dug into it with its clumsy fingers and demolished the critical internals underneath.

The mech lost power, prompting the Urman to drop its first kill.

"Who's next?!"

Both the knight and the swordsman mech recovered somewhat, although they hadn't made it in time to rescue their unfortunate fellow pirate. Both of them flanked the Urman and started to prod at the brawler mech with their swords.

While Walter occupied the two mechs, the rest of the Whalers dealt with the riff raff. Fadah's Blackbeak shone at this moment by weaving through the disarrayed pirates like a shuttle racer through an asteroid field.

Each time Fadah passed by a mech, he opportunistically thrust or slashed the Blackbeak's sword. Any retaliation sent in the modified knight's way would either be dodged or absorbed by its shield.

Fadah started to grow fond of this extra defensive option. "This shield is a cheat!"

Despite the shabby quality of most Whaler mechs, they had the edge over the pirates. The pirate mech pilots suffered from various amounts of disorientation while their mechs suffered minor impact damage from the rough landing.

The pirates could have recovered their full strength after an hour of acclimatization, but the Whalers spoiled their plans.

In addition, the Whalers spent days getting used to the Glowing Planet's unusual environment. The lack of atmosphere, the reduced 0.7 gravity and the strange everpresent green glow all took time to get accustomed to. Some Whalers even used the abnormal conditions to their advantage.

Fadah laughed as he piloted his Blackbeak like a nimble mouse among a clumsy herd of elephants. Even though his sword strikes didn't have much power behind him, his constant harassment successfully threw the pirates off balance.

His Blackbeak approached an enemy rifleman mech from behind and chopped at its arm, forcing the pirate mech to cease its attack on a vulnerable Whaler. Fadah didn't stick around to make a follow-up attack but instead preserved his momentum and veered towards another knight mech that locked its armament against a battle-axe wielding mech.

"Lou! Keep the git in place!"

"Got it, Fadah!"

Lou forced the pirate knight in a bitter struggle, pushing it back and knocking it slightly off-balance. Fadah took advantage of the opening by lunging forward and putting his mech's full weight behind its sword.

The tip buried straight through the back of the knight's substantial armor and happened to dig deep enough to slice through the cockpit, instantly killing the pilot within.

"Great job, Lou!"

"Thanks. Let's mop up the rest!"

The Whalers decisively tipped the balance in their favor over the next couple of minutes. With Walter occupying their two best fighters, the pirates found themselves hard-pressed to fend off the Whalers attacking from each direction.

At some point in time, the pirate rifleman mechs shifted focus. Instead of shooting at the closest threat, they turned around and focused all of their firepower on one of the Whalers piloting a light mech.

A barrage of high-powered lasers and explosive shells struck the terrain around the light mech. The pirate mechs quickly corrected their aim and started landing solid hits on the Whaler mech.

"Hoyler! Get out of there!"

"I'm trying but they're boxing me in! URGH!"

An explosive shell ripped its leg, causing the light mech to falter in its steps. Hoyler's mech spun around and exposed its back towards the enemy for a single instant. The next volley of shells and lasers struck aside the flimsy rear armor and reached the compact energy cells buried underneath.

"NO!"

Hoyler's small and nimble light mech exploded before its pilot even had a chance to eject. The combined explosive and electric discharge wrenched every mech from their feet, flinging them away as the terrain buckled from underneath.

They landed on their backs or sides in a series of violent crunches. If the Glowing Planet possessed air, then the resulting pressure wave from the discharge would have squashed them straight into the cliffs.

Of all the mechs, only two recovered quickly. Walter's Urman only suffered marginally due to its immense bulk and stable footing. Fadah anticipated the blast in time and curled his Blackbeak just before their footing underwent an upheaval.

"Hoyler! He's gone!"

"Finish off these scum!"

With the help of the Urman and the Blackbeak, the Whalers ruthlessly finished off the immobilized pirate mechs. Their pilots hadn't been aware of the overcharge phenomenon so they hadn't been on-guard against a violent explosion like that. They never recovered before the Whalers stomped their cockpits with the foot of their mechs.

After they finished the battle, they stood in silence to honor their fallen brother. Hoyler had been one of Walter's early recruits, and while he never amounted to anything in the Whalers, his steady presence had been a pillar to the entire gang.

"Finish off the ship. Don't leave any survivors."

The Whalers didn't think about recovering the ship or any of its cargo. Their ranged mechs simply blasted it from a distance while the crew of the vessel ran around like headless chickens.

The gang didn't even bother chasing any of the pirates running away on foot. Their vacuum-sealed suits only lasted them a couple of days at most. Without any other supplies, they'd starve in the harsh and desolate landscape of the Glowing Planet.

Once the fallen carrier turned into a pile of broken chunks, the Whalers carefully dug up any pieces of Hoyler's mech they could find and bring them back to camp.

Ves halted the feed that enabled him to spy on the Blackbeak at work and sighed. "I told them they'd face setbacks."

The Whalers overestimated their abilities and committed to the fight with more aggression than they needed. Still, the intense battle gave Ves a first-hand glimpse of how the new Blackbeak fared.

Fadah delivered a marvelous performance. All of the modifications that added to its mobility had been worth it as Fadah flexed and moved his mech in a way that resembled a dance. The pirates had never been able to catch the Blackbeak once.

Still, Ves placed a caveat on his observations. "Fadah can only get away with it on the Glowing Planet."

The lack of atmosphere took away the need to fight against air friction. The lighter gravity allowed the Blackbeak to pull off moves that medium mechs wouldn't be able to in ordinary circumstances.

Ves had to admit that for all of his smarts, he overlooked the environment as a decisive factor that could change the performance of a mech.

He wouldn't be blamed for making such an elementary mistakes. Most battles on land occurred on terraformed planets that had been cherry-picked by colonists because their gravity closely matched the Terran standard.

Humanity's true origin came from Old Earth. Their species thrived best if they propagated onto planets with environments that closely matched their ancestral home.

The battle that Ves witnessed earlier taught him that his mechs may often be deployed under strange conditions. During the design process, he modelled his Blackbeak's performance under a variety of abnormal environments, but he always treated those simulations as a chore.

Now, he realized that those simulations foretold some very important outcomes for his mech. "The perfect mech that performs well in every possible environment doesn't exist. A bad design under standard conditions might be able to redeem itself in other conditions."

Ves quietly digested this lesson as the Walter and his men returned to their fortified camp.

### Chapter 293 Stalemate

The loss of Hoyler and the way he died left the Whalers in a somber mood. Ves hoped their rude awakening would push them to work more meticulously, but the Whalers showed a remarkable ability to move on from tragedy.

They held a festive party over the night where over half of the Whalers drunk themselves into a stupor. By the time they woke up the next morning, the pain at losing Hoyler had become a distant pang.

Everything went back to normal, although the Whalers heightened their alertness. No more pirate vessels fell from the sky in their vicinity.

In fact, every descending carrier aimed to land in the middle of unclaimed terrain. The ships that crashed near the Vesians or the Brighters had been forced to veer from their original trajectories due to the damage they suffered from the battle up in space.

This left everyone with a bit of reprieve. Until the pirates recovered from their landings and gathered together, they posed no threat to the Whalers.

Fadah and Ves gathered at the stables where the Blackbeak rested. The mech didn't suffer anything more than a couple of scratches at the hands of

the pirates. It actually sustained more damage from its fall when Hoyler's mech blew up, and that had to be fixed.

"I can fix the Blackbeak up in half a day." He said, eyeing his own work with a new sense of appreciation. The lack of armor didn't seem so bad now that he knew that Fadah would be able to make the most of it on the Glowing Planet. "Is there anything else you'd like to be modified while I'm at it?"

"No." Fadah lethargically shook his head. "The Blackbeak is still in a pretty good shape. Just do the basics and move on to fixing the other mechs."

"Alright."

Ves quietly went to work, though inwardly he sighed again. Fadah expected too much from him. He wasn't a miracle worker. The Whalers piloted cheap and badly maintained mechs. Their workshops lacked a lot of advanced tools and the mech technicians resembled bums more than professionals.

Still, he kept his complaints to himself and tried to make the best of it, knowing that he might need to get accustomed to working under trying circumstances.

With his penchant for diving into trouble, he might be put into situations where he'd be forced to work on a mech without any tools or supplies.

A couple of days went by as Ves modified mech after mech. Nothing much happened on the ground.

The pirates that landed on the surface gathered up and formed a series of underground bases. Occasionally, the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion up in orbit bombarded their positions, but the sheer amount of distance and some unknown influences from the Glowing Planet caused most shots to miss their mark.

It was a waste of time and energy to bombard the pirates unless they gathered at least an entire regiment.

However, whenever they did so, the pirate fleet that remained in the vicinity of the Glowing Planet would move in and threaten the mechs. This led to complicated orbital maneuvering where the three sides tried to box each other in to no avail. All of the fruitless course adjustments frustrated the pilots that had to remain on standby like Ghanso.

"When will this ever end?!" He moaned inside his Vhedra-S.

"It'll end when the pirates slip up." Old Man Alex replied.

"Like that'll ever happen. Those Dragons of the Void bastards are cunning as hell, and slippery to boot. They keep bluffing us over and over and we keep falling for their tricks."

"That's spaceborn combat for you. It's not as if we're on land where we'll halt our movement once we shut off our engines. Everything is in motion. In order to thrive in space, you have to understand the mechanics behind all this stuff."

"Do you?"

"Nah. Are you crazy? I'd rather improve my piloting skill than to go back to school. Leave the thinking to Lieutenant Fairfax and Captain Rynsel. I heard they took some extra courses in order to qualify for promotion."

That opened up some doors in Ghanso's mind. He understood the need to become more familiar with how movement worked in space. The basic courses taught in the academies only scratched the surface of what had happened here.

"Maybe I'll register for those classes as well."

"Good luck, then. You're young enough to keep learning, so make the most out of it while you still can. Don't ever stop improving!"

Ghanso detected some regret in Old Man Alex's voice. Perhaps the man missed a lot of opportunities in his youth. "Thanks for the guidance."

"It's nothing. You Larkinsons are able to figure things out sooner or later. If not me, then some other relative of yours would have clued you in."

That did not detract from the value of Alex's advice. Ghanso opened up his comm and browsed for the next available openings for the classes he had in mind.

While a stalemate continued to persist in space, back on the ground, Ves took a break after modifying the tenth mech that passed in his hands.

"Alright, this is enough. Go take the rest of the day off!"

The exhausted mech technicians whooped as they dropped their tools on the deck. Ves winced at the careless treatment of their gear. If only the Whalers had a proper chief to knock some sense into their skulls.

Lately, Ves did all of his work underground. The Whalers finished tunneling a couple of secure mech-sized halls, and finishing moving most of their surface assets to these empty spaces. Ves felt better for having layers of rocks stand between his head and a laser beam from orbit.

"Melkor!"

He met Melkor by the entrance of the workshop. Lately, his cousin had been volunteering to go on patrols. Even though Lucky had run off to dig up highly valuable exotics, Ves hardly felt any threat from the Whalers. Thus, he allowed Melkor to volunteer for other duties.

"We need to discuss something." Melkor as he guided Ves by the arm. "It concerns the battle in space. There's a chance we might get cut off from escape, at least for the next couple of weeks."

Ves turned sour as he contemplated the possibility. Nothing good ever happened when a groundside force got cuff off from support up in orbit. He already went through a munity in his previous adventure to Groening IV.

'What's the Mech Corps up to?'

"My guess is that they've decided the 4th division is too exposed and outnumbered to make a play for orbital supremacy. It might even be impossible to maintain geosynchronous orbit over their men on the ground. They're pulling back to a higher orbit over the planet where they have much more room to maneuver. The Blood Claws and the Whalers and the other outfits who signed on with them will follow suit."

So we're letting the pirates hover over the planet with impunity?

"Not exactly. They've been forced into an even higher orbit. They're so far away in the skies that they won't be able to threaten our base. The men I've talked with heard from other men who speculated that the pirates are waiting for reinforcements. Either they're expecting a lot of help, or they're holding secret talks with the mercenaries who haven't signed a contract yet."

Ves understood Melkor's concern. They couldn't rule out the possibility that the mercenary lords would throw their lot with the pirates, who possessed the most ships out of the three principal forces battling for control.

They started to discuss contingencies. Anything could happen in the next weeks, and the Whalers might end up facing a threat that none of them could beat.

"I'll divert some supplies from the Whalers. They don't even guard them. All they're focused on is the growing pile of exotics that they've dug out of the soil."

Melkor nodded. "Okay. I will volunteer to go on patrol outside the walls. I'll be mapping our escape routes and note any dangers along the way."

They both prayed that they never had to enact their contingencies, but the balance of power kept shifting out of the favor of the Bright Republic. The

mercenary lords who decided to stay neutral did so because they lacked faith in the Republic's strength.

Over time, the Mech Corps would continue to diminish in power. Melkor passed on to Ves that the Mech Corps refused to send more divisions to the Glowing Planet. They couldn't afford to strip their defenses in favor of chasing after riches onto an unknown alien planet.

"What about the Vesians?"

"I have no clue." Melkor shrugged. "The Mech Legion doesn't appear to be expecting any reinforcements either. I think they're too scared to commit so many forces across the border. It's easier for us to ambush us them if they have to enter our territory first."

Ves nodded in understanding and walked away. Now that he had some time to himself, Ves intended to return to the barracks and sleep. He exited the workshop hall and traversed the hollowed-out corridors towards his destination.

The grim underground tunnels cast his surroundings in a depressing light. He preferred the creepy green glow over the corridor's harsh white ceiling lights.

The only upside to working underground was that the Whalers sealed the entrances shut. Everyone inside ditched their bulky hazard suits, including Ves. Even if the base suffered an attack which caused the air to leak out, he still had his anti-grav clothes to provide him with some oxygen.

Ves passed by an empty room that hadn't been put to use yet. As he turned his head for a peek, he suddenly felt a slim but incredibly strong palm push him inside.

He tumbled into the room into a heap. That palm carried a lot of strength, much more than his enhanced body could handle!

"Who's there!?" He yelled and whipped up his back pistol towards the entrance, only to meet a familiar sight. "No! You can't be here! You're not real!"

A chill ran through his body as he met his mother's apparition again. After his first encounter with his mother, he tried to convince himself that she hadn't actually risen from the dead.

"Vesssssss....." His mother dragged on as her body hovered closer to her son. Each time his mother came close, Ves took a step back. The chill in his body grew more frigid and his mind grew sluggish. The ghost of his mother called out to him in a way that turned him into a helpless young toddler that yearned for his mother's embrace.

"You're... not... real..." Ves hissed from between his gritted teeth as he fought back against his uncooperative mind and body. "This... is... all... in... my... mind..."

"My Vessie boy. The heart doesn't lie. Don't you recognize me?" His mother asked as she neared his son. She grew more substantial the closer she got to Ves. "Dreams and reality are interconnected. What you see in front of you doesn't need to exist in order to exist."

"Stop acting like my mother! You are nothing like her!" He uttered as his back bumped against the wall of the room. He slid his body sideways until he trapped himself in a corner.

His mother closed in with a disappointed expression. "Ves... I never meant for you to be involved with mechs. Your father always insisted that mechs is in your blood, but it's not. You shouldn't have become a mech designer and you shouldn't have come here in the first place."

"Why...?"

"Because I had someone change your genes." She revealed as she stopped in front of Ves. Her finger reached out and trailed his cheek again. Her ghostly finger felt very real to Ves. "You used to be a Larkinson. When I thought about my baby boy risking his life on a foreign planet, I couldn't bear the thought of losing you. I went behind your father's back and visited a clinic in Bentheim to take away your genetic aptitude."

"What? Mother, that's nonsense!"

"It's true. I took away your affinity for mechs."

"You're lying!" He screamed, though his voice lacked his usual strength. "You loved me. You always promised me you'd support me if I became a pilot..."

Even though he already reconciled himself with his lot in life, his mother had brutally ripped open his mental wounds. The pain of disappointment and the despair of knowing that he could never be a true Larkinson had always lurked in his mind.

His mother didn't seem to care.

"Ves. You should have stayed at Cloudy Curtain. You should have been safe there." Her face turned ugly. "But your father ruined it all!"

#### Chapter 294 Ghos

In the Age of Mechs, the greatest honor a young child could ever receive was to learn he had the potential to become a mech pilot. Society elevated such potentates and granted them many privileges in order to facilitate their ability to pilot a mech.

Yet not every parent wished their child to become a mech pilot. Considering the immense casualties the Republic suffered after each war against the Kingdom, a growing underground movement formed between mothers who wished their children would never have to face another mech on the battlefield.

Wouldn't it be better if their child remained home and took up a mundane job instead of throwing away his life for an empty cause? As new lives bloomed within their bellies, these mothers would do everything to see their offspring live a long and fulfilling life.

Thus, they formed an underground movement. With the complicity of illegal genetic clinics, they secretly broke the chain of genes through modified gene treatments that had ordinarily been used to immunize their unborn children against genetic defects.

This could only be done in the first months of their pregnancies. Gene modification became increasingly more difficult as their children grew. Only extremely extravagant means like gene boosts could change a person's entire genetic makeup.

"Mother... you're lying..." Ves softly retorted, even though her revelation sounded true in his heart. "Why did you break my genes? And what did father do?"

"Isn't it obvious?" His mother shook her head. "That gift of yours is Ryncol's solution to your problem. He knew what I had done, and even if he never confronted me about it, he found his own way to defy me!"

Her body became more substantial the longer she lingered close to Ves. He could even feel the energies quietly circulating inside his body being siphoned away by her somehow. Each mote of energy that entered her body seemed to strengthen her aura, suppressing Ves to the point where he could barely lean against the corner of the room.

"What are you, mother? How did you turn into this ghost?"

She smiled at him and patted his head like he was a child. His mother didn't answer his question, but stared at him with a mixture of loathing and love.

Ves felt deeply uncomfortable at seeing his mother's face so warped in this way. It was as if this ghost wanted violate his most cherished and innocent memories of his mother.

The standoff continued until the energy cycle inside his body started to stutter. More than half of his vigorous energy had been handed over to the ghost who wore the visage of his mother. Ves didn't believe his mother came back from the dead. No parent would ever treat his child this way. With a wordless grunt, Ves summoned up the vestiges of his strength and pushed himself from the wall.

His body flew right through his mother's translucent body. Her dress hardly shifted as Ves encountered nothing but air. He sprawled to the floor yet again. This time, it took many seconds for him to turn around.

His mother had disappeared. She was gone like the wind.

Ves dried the tears in his eyes and began to recover more of his strength. His lethargic energy cycle continued its figure-eight rotation, but for the first time in months, Ves didn't feel as if he was one step away from being blown up by Dr. Jutland's gift.

Should he be thankful for his mother for delaying the bomb that ticked inside his body?

"That's not my mother." He repeated as he deeply tried to convince himself that he faced some sort of shapeshifting ghost. "My mother would never try to hurt me."

Somehow, his excuses rang hollow. Deep within his heart, some primal vestige of his love for his mother had judged the ghost to be who she said she was. No matter how much logic Ves threw at his heart, it never swayed from its judgement.

Eventually, Ves did what he had always done when he faced an intractable problem. He shoved it to the back of his mind and tried to pretend the incident never happened.

Ves wearily left the empty room and walked back to the barracks where he holed up in his private bunk and slept.

He had no trouble falling asleep.

The next morning, Ves wearily woke up and returned to his work. Just over a hundred mechs awaited his ministrations. No one wanted to repeat Hoyler's experience. With their mechs stuffed with overcharged energy cells, each pilot risked instant death whenever they deployed.

"Please, Mr. Larkinson! Please help me!" A pilot begged to Ves. He even bent his knees in supplication to the almighty mech designer. "I don't care if you slow down my mech. Just make it safer for me to pilot!"

Sighing, Ves agreed to fulfill the pilot's request. He learned the hard way that they didn't take his realistic assessment very well. The Whalers expected Ves to reduce the risk by as much as fifty percent.

In actuality, the most he could do was to pull off some tricks to reduce the likelihood of setting off the energy cells by ten percent at most. He couldn't alter the fundamental makeup of a mech, especially not with the means the Whalers had at their disposal.

"There are limits to how much armor I can stuff to the rear of these mechs."

The Whalers used a substantial amount of light mechs and frontline mechs. Both of them had very little tolerance for added weight. Their designs already reached their limits in terms of weight allocation, so Ves always had to remove something else in order to improve the protection around the energy cells.

All of it was barely worth the effort, yet Ves had to play the charlatan in order to put a stop to the growing panic among the Whalers. Many mech pilots had grown increasingly paranoid about their own mechs. Only after Ves adjusted their machines did they calm down from their fright.

Fortunately, the pirates hadn't made a move against the Whalers during this grace period. The battle in space continued to be tepid while the pirates on the ground only formed sporadic raids.

The Mech Corps didn't like it when a group of pirates gathered together within their sphere of influence. They proactively sent out hunting parties to eliminate any small to medium-sized gathering of pirate mechs within the vicinity.

Ves got word that the Mech Corps detected a large-scale gathering of pirates, and tasked the Blood Claws to eliminate the group before they became fully entrenched.

In turn, the Blood Claws called upon their own subordinates to assist them in this endeavor. Walter's Whalers had to contribute twenty mechs to the engagement.

Walter decided to send out three different squads, one of which happened to be the fast-reaction squad led by Fadah. This would be the Blackbeak's second serious deployment.

This time, the entire mech force would be leaving the vicinity of the base. Due to the intense amount of interference on the planet, the mechs would be out of communication for days. Ves wouldn't be able to enjoy a live picture of the Blackbeak in action. He could only resort to activating a hidden recording function inside his mech.

"The Blood Claws are deploying over two-hundred mechs." Fadah spoke as he waited for Ves to finish his final touch-ups. "I even heard there's a new star among their midst. They say she's related to you."

That must have been Raella. "I know. She's my cousin. I don't think she needs any help, but please take care of her when you can. Like any Larkinson, she's a good mech pilot, but she's never been on an actual battlefield."

"Hah! Don't worry, Ves. Daddy Fadah will take care of your baby cousin!" The pilot smacked his chest for emphasis. "With this super-fast Blackbeak, there's no way I can lose to any pirate!"

Ves hadn't been allowed to accompany the task force. The Blood Claws wanted to flatten the pirates quickly, and that meant they had to minimize their burdens. A mech designer like Ves wouldn't be too useful at the very front, especially if he couldn't bring any supplies.

"I hope you can keep your word."

After Fadah and nineteen other Whalers entered the mechs and stepped out of base, some of the liveliness had disappeared. No one who remained could tell whether all twenty would return.

Ves thought this was good. Walter's Whalers finally dropped some of their complacency and seriously started to weigh the risks.

During his free time, Ves carefully investigated the ghost sightings among the Whalers. He discreetly tracked down the people who reported the hallucinations and found a couple of patterns.

First, everyone saw a loved one who had died. This could be their parents, their grandparents or some other acquaintance who moved on from this galaxy.

Second, no one ever experienced multiple hallucinations. Half the people who reported the sightings couldn't even remember the incidents.

Third, none of the people who experienced these hallucinations had something sucked out of their bodies. Only Ves had the fortune to encounter a ghost who harvested from his bountiful life energies.

When he came to these conclusions, he depressingly rubbed his eyes. "Am I some sort of human battery for these ghosts? How many of them are there?"

He faintly suspected that only one ghost haunted this base. The ghost must be proficient in reading the memories of its victims and imitate what he stole from their minds.

It was the only explanation Ves could come up with that allowed him to deny the continued existence of his mother. He simply didn't want to accept that his mother had really talked to him in this manner.

Ves had half-convinced himself that the ghost would pay another visit to him sooner or later. His special physique must be a wonderful tonic for insubstantial life forms that existed more in the imaginary realm than the physical realm.

"How can I hurt a ghost?"

He left out any mundane means like hitting it with a rod or shooting it with a pistol. The ghost had already showed off its ability to ignore anything it didn't wish to touch.

"I can't use anything conventional."

The only solution he could turn to was to use the heaven-defying properties of exotic materials.

Unfortunately, the minerals the Whalers mined up to this point didn't fit the job. Most of the ores the Whalers dug up with their mining equipment consisted of low-tier exotics with simple effects such as lighter mass or a little bit of extra

sturdiness. They didn't differ too much from the junk exotics that any idiot could pick off the ground.

"The really valuable stuff should be buried deep underground or somewhere closer to the center of the red zone."

The red zone exhibited a lot of strange effects. Without the dimensional smoothers, the sheer amount of deadly fluctuations would have wiped out the Mech Corps that settled on this resource-rich territory.

"I've got to find a way to get into the red zone."

Not only did Ves want to obtain some materials that could help him fend off his so-called mother, he also wanted to make headway into completing the System's mission. He quietly activated his Privacy Shield and re-read the mission again.

[Mission]

Mission: Obtaining the Core

Difficulty: B-Rank

Prerequisites: Find your way to the Glowing Planet

Description

The rogue planet that has been discovered by the humans hides a special ore that originates from its core. Seek out a hand-sized sample of this ore and offer it to the Mech Designer System.

Failure condition: Fail to acquire a substance from the core of the Glowing Planet within ninety days from the issuance of this mission. Your ability to spend Design Points will be curtailed for two years.

Reward:

Special Upgrade Voucher (Machine), 10 golden lottery tickets

The System didn't reveal anything useful about this ore. It didn't tell him how it looked like and what kind of benefits it offered. Ves could only tell that the System valued it extremely highly, given that it attached a steep penalty for failing this task.

"At least the rewards should be something good."

Ves didn't put much stock into low-tier lottery tickets, but the System never skimmed when it came to something good. The golden lottery tickets should be offering something extremely good, though he could also end up with junk if his luck had taken the wrong turn.

What he really aimed for was the so-called Special Upgrade Voucher (Machine). It sounded like he could upgrade the parameters of any machine he owned, and by a significant margin to boot. Depending on the definition of 'machine', Ves could upgrade anything, from Lucky, to his Dortmund printer, to his highly modified comm module.

"If this ore is as valuable as I think, then this voucher should be worth effort to seek it out."

### **Chapter 295 Numbers vs Quality**

Ves faced an important impediment to fulfilling the System's mission. Walter's Whalers would never be able to breach to the core with their low-tech mining equipment.

They simply didn't possess the infrastructure to dig more than a couple of kilometers underground, and neither did they held the inclination to do so.

Why bother digging so deep when they harvested enough riches at their current depths?

He'd have to resort to other outfits to bring him to the core. Ves doubted the Blood Claws possessed much more ambition than the Whalers. Even if they

brought more sophisticated gear, they'd only focus on the immediate fruits instead of the richer treasures buried deep.

"It's got to be the Mech Corps. Only they have the ambition to exploit this planet completely."

The Mech Corps already revealed their ambitions by claiming one of the red zones of the planet. Despite its many dangers, the red zone also offered some of the richest deposits of exotics.

Furthermore, it was likely that the Mech Corps must be holding some suspicions of this wondrous planet. They would definitely attempt to explore the unknown as much as they could before the seventy-day deadline had passed.

"I've got to find a way to slip into the Mech Corps."

That was a very tall order. The 4th Bentheim Division that presided over the base in the red zone didn't allow any entry to outsiders. Ves couldn't find a good excuse to convince the guards to let him roam around sensitive military regions either, let alone join a deep core mining expedition to the center of the Glowing Planet.

"Let's take this one step at a time. Every lofty goal is insurmountable if you stay at the beginning."

His first task would be to find a way for the Mech Corps to allow him to enter the red zone. It would be better if they invited him on their own initiative, which should only happen if he offered something vital that only he could do.

What was the biggest problem facing the Mech Corps on this planet?

"It's got to be the overcharge phenomenon."

As long as the energy cells kept receiving an overcharge, every mech that ran on these type of cells turned into portable bombs.

Ironically, cheap low-tier mechs like the ones procured by the Whalers didn't pose much of a risk. Sure, even a light mech's catastrophic discharge had been capable of throwing nearby mechs off their feet, but that was the extent of the damage.

Heavier and more advanced mechs carried as much as ten times more energy than Hoyler's pitiful light mech. They had to in order to deliver the kind of performance their designers had in mind.

The kind of energy cells used in an advanced mech like the Havalax compressed a lot more energy in a much smaller package. This enabled Dumont to stuff the rear of his Havalax with double or triple the amount of energy cells, each of which carried an extremely potent amount of power.

"Only one of them has to fail."

If one cell blew up, the adjacent cells quickly followed. This would continue to cascade until the entire advanced blew up in a titanic discharge that would swallow any other mech in the vicinity.

This was the scariest part. Any mech in range of this violent explosion risked setting off their own energy cells. Again, only a single failure sufficed to set off another sudden blast.

As long as enough mechs had gathered in the same place, this could lead to an increasingly devastating chain reaction that would swallow both the Mech Corps and whoever they fought. Nothing could survive these runaway explosions.

"While the Mech Corps can rely on their fuel cell mechs to do the heavy lifting, it won't be possible to furlough over eighty percent of their mechs."

Mechs that ran on pure energy cells remained the norm in the Mech Corps. The convenience of working with a single, universal resource that could be

replenished in a million different ways outweighed the higher amount of energy density that processed fuel provided.

If an energy-driven mech somehow got stranded, its pilot could whip out the energy solar chargers and let the local sun replenish the spent cells. While it would take years to charge up a single cell this way, at least it offered hope.

The only problem was that Ves didn't have a clue how to go about the problem. The Mech Corps undoubtedly put a lot of researchers together to fix the problem themselves. If Ves wanted to upstage those scientists, he'd have to find a way to cheat.

"That's where the System should come in."

He still saved up a decent amount of DP. The last time he checked his reserve, he accumulated more than 50,000 DP, all of which he'd earned from selling his Blackbeak models.

Strangely enough, the System included the bronze-label mechs fabricated by EME to his credit as well. Ves estimated that EME must have earned a fortune by selling over four-hundred mechs so far. Since the System based its DP rewards by revenue instead of profits, Ves received a lot more DP from EME than from the LMC's own in-house production.

"There's a benefit to a larger scale of production."

The System's remuneration system prioritized the spread of his designs over how he could maximize the profits of each mech. In a way, their goals diverged, as Ves wanted to focus on selling a limited quantity of high quality mechs while the System wanted to spread his mechs regardless of their merits.

In any case, that was a problem for another day. First, he had to consider how to spend his DP. 50,000 DP sounded a lot, but it could easily be wasted if he invested in the wrong skills and items.

"I've got to learn more about the overcharge phenomenon first. Until I can narrow down the list of possible solutions, I have no clue where I can best spend my DP."

Ves turned off his comm and went back to work. Even if he wanted to spend some time on researching the overcharge phenomenon, he still had to meet his obligations to the Whalers. He made a promise, after all.

Through his work, Ves became exposed to a variety of different mechs, almost all of which had been cheap, second-hand or modified to the point where he couldn't figure out their original design.

Getting his hands dirty with each of these mechs had broadened his vision concerning the many ways in which a mech designer chose to reduce the cost of their designs. Ves had never thought up such extreme measures, and getting a detailed glimpse of other people's works enlightened him to a different style of designing mechs.

"I've always been straight and narrow with my designs. Quality comes first."

Both the Marc Antony and the Blackbeak carried his philosophy of squeezing as much quality as possible out of the limitations set by his budget.

For example, the Mark II had been designed to deliver the most amount of value for its recommended price tag of 30 million credits, while the Blackbeak tried to do the same for a base price of 60 million credits. Ves always set a budget and tried to exceed the average level of performance of other designs that cost the same.

Through these cheap designs, Ves figured out a different philosophy. It was a philosophy that revolved around cost, and cost alone.

Quality and performance didn't matter too much, not as this price range. Mechs that cost less than 10 million credits performed so badly that it didn't matter if you dropped a little lower. As long as you could shave off a couple of

hundred thousand credits here and there, any compromise in performance could be justified.

All of this had to do with the inherent cost efficiency of numbers versus quality.

The Bright Republic's mech industry maintained a very rough rule of thumb on this issue.

Two mechs that cost 5 million credits each could beat a single mech worth 15 million credits.

Two mechs that cost 10 million credits each could beat a single mech worth 30 million credits.

Two mechs that cost 20 million credits each could beat a single mech worth 60 million credits.

Two mechs that cost 50 million credits each could beat a single mech worth 120 million credits.

Four mechs that cost 150 million credits each could beat a single mech worth 1 billion credits.

These figures stated that it was always better to field more mechs than to invest in a smaller amount of more expensive mechs. Even that single mech worth 1 billion credits would be forced to run like a dog if it faced a swarm of mechs that each cost only 5 million credits.

Smaller outfits like the Whalers didn't lack for low-quality mech pilots. They often worried about coming up with the money to buy more mechs. This led to the decision to invest in lots of cheap mechs.

The elite portion of the Mech Corps and the better-off outfits faced the opposite situation. They often enjoyed abundant funding, but they faced an insurmountable bottleneck in terms of recruiting talented mech pilots. Each

advanced pilot and higher was a treasure, and it would be a waste if they paired them with a worthless mech.

These kind of buyers had to maximize the value they could squeeze out of their pilots. They didn't care as much about how much money they had to spend, so long as their pilots could fully exploit their talents.

Ves had always focused on the latter clientele and completely neglected the segment of the market with the highest volume of sales. He thought that such cheap mechs lacked sophistication, and that they derived the majority of their cost savings by cutting corners.

"It's true, but there's more to it."

His opinion turned out to be prejudiced. After multiple detailed studies of their designs, Ves gained a new appreciation of budget mechs.

"It's true that they cut a lot of corners, but they're always very inventive about it. They cut out anything that's superfluous and treat the parts that absolutely essential with reverence."

The key to keeping down the costs lay in specializing the designs.

An expensive design like the Blackbeak could fulfill multiple roles. While Ves designed it as an offensive knight, it possessed enough traits from other types to act like a skirmisher or defensive knight if the situation called for it. Any buyer would easily be able to accentuate these roles by applying some aftermarket modifications to the frame.

Ves had already done so for Fadah's Blackbeak.

The cheap mechs in the hands of the rest of the Whalers lacked this fluidity in roles. Their designers only kept one rigid vision in mind when they came up with their designs.

A light skirmisher always functioned as a decent skirmisher, but it lacked the advanced sensors to act as a scout. It also couldn't be employed as a light rifleman due to the lack of optimization in its arms.

He learned that this wasn't a bad thing. A mech specialized for one single style of combat delivered so much cost savings that they'd been able to depress the production cost to an enviably low sum.

"A hyper-specialized design is probably twenty-five percent cheaper than a standard design."

To gangs and mercenary corps with little funds at their disposal, the demerits of these designs didn't scare them off too much. Anything that couldn't be solved with quality could be compensated by numbers.

For the first time since the start of his career, Ves felt the urge to design a cheap but effective frontline mech.

"Walter's Whalers can do better. They're getting stiffed by their suppliers."

Ves had casually inquired how much they spent on these mechs, and in his eyes they'd been scammed. The Whalers spent five million credits on pieces of junk that shouldn't be worth more than three million credits.

"I can do better."

### Chapter 296 Preemptive Strike

Raella Larkinson strode among the vanguard of the Blood Claws horde. Over two hundred mechs spent days trying to traverse the rugged and uneven terrain of the Glowing Planet.

Since she didn't bring her own mech along, the Blood Claws lent her a mech that fit her well.

The Sliverath wasn't like her Vectrix at all.

Her previous duelling-oriented mech excelled at quick bursts of performance, offering a lot of power at the cost of poor efficiency.

That didn't mean the Sliverath turned those parameters around, but it offered a much flatter performance curve in order to extend its uptime. At their current power-saving pace of marching, the Sliverath could easily last a couple of days without replenishing its energy cells.

The Blood Claws still did so after each day in case they met an ambush. A couple of low hovering transports followed far behind them to supply the mechs. Everyone kept an extremely lengthy distance from the transport vessels, since they carried so many energy cells that the explosion could mimic a weapon of mass destruction if they all set off.

The overcharge phenomenon manifested more changes than that. Each mech kept a healthy distance from each other as well in order to avoid a chain reaction.

They even knew precisely how far they had to disperse. Some of the scientists from the Mech Corps came up with a formula that determined the volatility of each mech from how many energy cells they carried and how much overcharge they held.

The results would be indexed from a number from 0 to 10. The number 0 represented no risk while the number 10 meant that a kilometer wide area would be scoured from end to end.

The Sliverath only received a score of 3, as the light skirmisher didn't offer much space to store a lot of energy cells. It also didn't drain as much as energy as a laser rifleman, so the smaller capacity didn't hinder the mech.

"Hey Dietrich." She called over her private channel with her boyfriend. "How's it going? Do you miss the feeling of flying in the air?"

"Not really. It's way too dangerous to pilot an aerial mech on this cursed planet. I'd rather hide behind some solid cover this time."

The Glowing Planet's abundant exotic minerals emitted constant interference fields that made flying a bad choice. Besides having to deal with unstable flight, any aerial mech would only need to be hit once before they popped like fireworks due to their light armor and heightened energy consumption.

Thus, Dietrich borrowed an average rifleman mech model instead of a mech identical to his Harrier. Even if he disliked being bound to the land, he didn't want to leave his girlfriend alone when she was about to embark on her first actual battle.

The attack force reached the pirate base a couple of hours later. A scout mech that had been watching over their activities met with Kanaan, the head of the force.

"Report."

"It's just like the boss predicted. The rats have just found out about the overcharge stuff and are scrambling to get their mechs back online. They even stopped their digging activities because of that. Most of their mechs and assets are still above ground."

The scout passed a detailed topographic map of the base to everyone in the attack force. Raella studied it with her own eyes and saw that the pirates circled their grounded carriers as makeshift walls.

"Are these carriers vulnerable?"

"No. The ship crews dismantled and hauled away their energy cells. They're solely running on ship-grade fuel now."

"A shame, but to be expected. The pirates aren't that stupid." Kanaan flatly remarked. "Have you identified the leaders?"

"Yeah. There's a squad of mechs that look fancier than the rest. They're probably part of the Dragons of the Void."

A number of dragon-themed mechs appeared over the projection. The command squad featured a high proportion of swordsman mechs and only included a couple of rifleman mechs for posterity.

"Damn, these swordsman mechs look slippery. It will be hard to pin them down, let alone blow up their energy cells."

After projecting the elite mechs, the scout also showed off some of the regular pirate mechs. "The rest of the pirate models are typical low-tier mechs. They're very diverse, but they're all crappy to an extent."

"What about fixed defenses? Do we have to worry about turrets and such?"

"Oh, they erected a couple of turrets, but as far as I'm aware of, they still run on their own energy cells. Focus at the base of the turrets if you want to pop those cells."

"Noted. Anything else we should know?"

"Yeah. Those ship-grade energy cells I just mentioned? The pirates chucked them to the other side of that mountain over there. I got a marksman stationed far away but with a direct line of sight of that pile."

"You're not thinking of..."

"Oh yeah, let's say we blow it up."

Everyone grinned at that suggestion. Pirates had never been very smart, and these ones seem dimmer than usual for dumping all of their excess energy cells in the same place. Even if the cells had been dumped a couple of kilometers away, the magnitude of the explosion should be unlike anything they had ever seen before.

Kanaan formed a quick adjustment to the plan. "Alright men, let's do it like this. Instead of surrounding the base from all sides, we'll be waiting behind those low hills on the opposite side of the big bang. That should shelter our mechs enough from the blast."

Once the massive explosion ran its course, the Blood Claws and their subordinate forces would rise up from the hills and shoot at the disoriented pirates. However, Kanaan didn't want to let the melee mechs like Raella's Sliverath go forth.

"It's too easy for mechs to clump up this way. It only takes one suicidal pirate to decide he wants to take his opponent with him to the grave. Stay with the ranged mechs and guard them against any incoming pirates."

With the plan set, the attack force moved to their new coordinates. Even though they tried to hide their maneuvers, somehow the pirates got wind of their presence. Alarms sounded out in their comm channels, alerted them of an imminent attack.

"No time! Everyone, hug the ground! Scouts, blow up the energy cells!"

A fair distance away, a single high-intensity laser beam struck the sturdy energy cells stacked up in a mound. The laser bore through the strengthened shell of the ship-grade energy cell and proceeded to excite the overcharged energy within.

**BOOOOOOOOOM!**

The chain reaction happened almost instantly after the first energy cell blew up. All of the explosions melded into a single overwhelming discharge that vaporized the nearby terrain and caused a hefty localized earthquake.

The pirates lost their footing due to the enormous blast. Lots of mechs fell over due to the instability. Only the Blood Claws remained stable as they already huddled their mechs on all fours.

"Attack!" Kanaan ordered.

The rifleman and cannoner mechs crested behind the hills and began to chew through the ships in their way. They made quick progress as they each focused on a couple of points. The combination of lasers, explosive shells and kinetic projectiles made quick work of the vulnerable hulls.

"The pirates are recovering!" A scout reported. "The enemy command squad are kicking the pirate mechs back to their feet!"

By the time the Blood Claws chewed through a single carrier, the command squad gathered over fifty mechs, with more enemies joining in at any moment.

"Hold position and continue firing!"

The Blood Claws faced more obstacles as the pirates erected a lot of mobile cover blocks. They consisted of cheap, bulky alloys that provided enough cover to protect a pair of mechs.

Neither side gained the advantage at the start, though the mechs fighting for the Blood Claws succeeded in killing a couple of pirate mechs that had been slow to recover. The incidental explosions from those mechs set back any attempts by the pirates to organize into a cohesive defense.

While they destroyed over twenty pirate mechs, the base held a lot more mechs than that. Even if some of them didn't function due to their safeguards, the pirates could still muster more than two-hundred-and-fifty mechs.

One of the dragon mechs organized a loose formation of a little less than a hundred melee mechs. Once they gathered up, they stormed out of the base in an oversized wave that stretches for several kilometers.

"Melee mechs, get ready! Remember, whatever you do, don't focus on their energy cells and keep your ejection trigger at hand. Don't hesitate to eject if you think your energy cells will be breached!"

Both sides met just over the hills in an awkward collision. As if agreed beforehand, neither the pirates nor the Blood Claws clumped up too much. The clash turned into a series of duels as each mech only faced a single opponent at a time.

"This is more like it." Raella grinned as her Sliverath unsheathed a pair of straight knives. Her mech danced forward, carrying with it her eagerness to gut her first pirate mech. "Come on! Let's see if you have what it takes!"

The pirate mech in front of her wielded a spear in one hand and a pistol in the other. While the pistol shot some miniature shells that scratched the Sliverath's coating, it hardly achieved anything else.

Raella outright ignored the pistol and deflected the incoming thrust of the spear by crossing the Sliverath's knives.

"Too weak!"

The spearman mech looked old and rusty. Its performance simply couldn't match a modern advanced mech like the Sliverath. She deftly curved her mech around her opponent and stabbed her knives into the upper back.

The knives peeled away the rear armor. Raella wanted to take out her opponent in one move, but her mech lacked the strength to dig in deeper.

"Damn, I forgot this isn't the Vectrix!"

Her Vectrix would have crippled her opponent's mech in a single strike. Raella hastily recovered from her blunder by moving away before darting back in again. She easily deflected the next one-armed spear stab before she slunk a knife into the rear internals of the pirate mech.

This time, the mech collapsed, having lost all of its power. Raella didn't stick around and moved her Sliverath away. She didn't want to stick around in case the pilot decided to self-destruct his disabled mech.

She aided an allied mech that looked to be in bad shape. The swordsman mech it faced possessed actual skill. Yet Raella made short work of the threat by outmaneuvering the slower mech. Again, she disabled the mech by stabbing it from the stab.

"These pirates are worse than amateur duelists!"

His cousins always warned her not to underestimate an actual battlefield. Raella had to admit they had a point when it came to the Vesia Kingdom's Mech Legion, but these pirates fought like trash.

Once she found her rhythm, Raella easily disabled the pirate mechs left and right. She achieved most of her results by teaming up with a fellow Blood Claw mech. Skirmishers like the Sliverath achieved the best results if their opponents had already been locked into combat with their opponents.

To the side, Raella absently noted that another mech copied the same strategy as hers. She recognized the distinctive black look of her cousin's Blackbeak mech. She sneered at the sight.

"I don't need a babysitter. You shouldn't have come here, Ves."

She ignored the black mech that followed in her Sliverath's footsteps and brought her mech to her next victim.

Over time, the hundred pirate mechs lost a third of their numbers. The difference in quality and the lack of preparation pressed the pirate mechs further away from the vulnerable ranged mechs.

Up to this point, none of the mechs had exploded as of yet. That changed when a rifleman mech bearing the emblem of the Dragons of the Void shot at an immobilized pirate mech.

It blew up, shaking the nearby mechs away from the center of the blast. Both the pirates and the Blood Claws scratched their head at the action. Didn't they worry about friendly fire?

Evidently, the rifleman mech threw common sense out of the window and continued to shoot at the downed mechs, all of which presented easy targets to an experienced rifleman mech pilot. Explosion after explosion erupted on the hills.

At least the Blood Claws already prepared for such a spiteful act. They always fought a healthy distance from the inner radius of any downed mech. This diminished the effectiveness of this tactic.

The Dragons of the Void changed tack. They issued a command that drove the surviving pirates mad. Somehow, they all went berserk.

#### Chapter 297 Takeru

"I'm in trouble!"

"Did they all take stimulants or something? They're fighting to the death!"

"AAhhhhh! Save me!"

They suffered their first casualty soon after the sudden change. A knight mech got surrounded by two sword-wielding pirates. The defensive knight lacked the speed to fend off both mechs.

One of the pirates deliberately chipped away at the energy cells stored underneath its thinner rear armor. Once the pirate struck the energy cells, they both turned into conflagrations that further disarrayed the mechs around them and even crippled the other pirate mech.

"They're suicidal!"

"Calm down!" Kanaan roared over the channel. "Ranged mechs, suppress the pirate rifleman mechs. Don't let them set off any more mechs. Everyone else,

don't hesitate to eject! If the pirates are eager to blow themselves up, then let's oblige them!"

Kanaan's words stabilized the Blood Claws pilot who had been wavering in their resolve. While it was dishonorable to eject too soon, the changes the Glowing Planet imposed on their mechs left them with little choice. They'd rather lose a mech and save a pilot than lose both of them for a needless cause.

Mechs continued to explode left and right, but the Blood Claws always ejected from their mechs in a timely manner. Once the threat of mutual destruction had been taken away, the pirates fell behind, as their reckless offensive turned them into mindless savages that only knew how to attack in a straightforward way.

Raella felt like she had the time of her life. Her nimble Sliverath easily coursed through the pirate formation and harassed them from the rear. Often times, she aborted her attacks and spun away, which distracted her targets and even prompted a couple of them to hit their self-destruct buttons prematurely.

"Hahahaha!" She laughed as she just finished toying with another mech who blew himself up for no reason. "Is this all you've got!?"

"No."

A swordsman mech almost struck the Sliverath. Only Raella's keen reflexes allowed her to juke her mech away at the last moment. She turned her sensors and gazed at the mech that almost cut off her mech and cursed.

She faced one of the elites this time. The command squad joined their suicidal subordinates and shored up their dwindling numbers. Raella happened to have the bad luck to draw the personal attention of one of those mechs.

"What's your name?"

"You can call me Takeru. And who might you be, milady?"

"Raella Larkinson."

The two mechs stood opposite of each other for a couple of seconds. Eventually, Raella made the first move. Her instincts as a mech athlete screamed at her to make the first move since she piloted the lighter mech.

The Sliverath slithered forth in an undulating trajectory that had been this model's hallmark. It didn't offer as much speed as the Vectrix, but it made up for it in flexibility.

Raella cautiously jabbed forward with a knife, only to get deflected by a powerful counter-strike that continued to chop at the Sliverath's head.

Fortunately, the skirmisher mech easily contorted its frame out of the path of the sword. Raella struck with her other knife, leaving behind a shallow nick on the arm.

"Damnit, what is your mech made of?"

The Slitherath didn't feature any compressed armor, but the mech piloted by her opponent evidently did. This placed a significant burden on her as the Slitherath had to target the same areas over and over to penetrate the tough compressed armor plating.

The dragon mech's pilot was no slouch either. Takeru showed an unprecedented level of mastery in swordsmanship as the dragon mech wielded its sword in both hands with powerful, sweeping strokes.

The speed and power behind each strike left little openings for Raella to exploit despite piloting the faster mech. Takeru ruthlessly took over her momentum and pressed the Sliverath back again and again.

"What the hell are you?! You're not a regular pirate!"

"You are way too green to know how real pirates fight. Let me show you the might of the dragons!"

The swordsman mech unleashed a flurry of continuous blows that left the Sliverath flustered. Both her knives kept being knocked back by the power of the rapid swirling sword strikes. As the Sliverath braced itself for another chop, the dragon mech suddenly lashed out with a kick which ruined its balance.

The sword chopped forth and struck an ugly rent in the Sliverath's chest. Only Raella's quick decision to go with the fall had saved her mech from being chopped apart by the shoulder.

A couple of long-ranged lasers struck the swordsman mech, but they did little but annoy it. Dietrich sporadically fired his rifle at Takeru's mech, but the angle and all of the other mechs in the way made it difficult for him to suppress the elite mech.

"Hold on, Raella! Help is on the way! My buddy Fadah will buy some time for you to retreat."

She didn't want to turn her back on this opponent. Even though Takeru outclassed her in both skill and mech, Raella wanted to prove herself as a warrior. Picking off those weak pirates didn't cut it for her.

Before the dragon mech unleashed another attack, a second mech struck it from behind, forcing Takeru to abort his attack. A slim moon-shaped phoenix shield slammed into the dragon mech's sword. The impact pushed the pirate mech away and allowed the Blackbeak to position itself in front of the damaged Sliverath.

"Raella, right? Your mech is in bad shape. You're in no shape to fight any further. I'll hold this bastard off for you!"

"No!" Raella growled, and tested the responsiveness of her mech. "I can still fight! Let's take him down together!"

Her left arm had lost most of its motive power. The damage to the shoulder had been too severe. Raella gave up on the limb and focused solely on using the Sliverath's right arm to deliver her attacks.

If her mech was in better shape, she would have insisted on taking on the elite mech alone, even though the odds of victory was low. Teaming up with Fadah had already pressed against her limits.

The Blackbeak mech shrugged and turned around to face the swordsman mech with its sword and shield. As a slimmed down offensive knight, the Blackbeak wouldn't fare well if it engaged in a straightforward slugging match against the pirate mech. Much like the Sliverath, the modified Blackbeak began to approach the dragon mech in a zig-zag and at an angle.

Fadah unleashed a couple of probing strikes, but Takeru aggressively deflected the attacks. He proved to be well-versed in dealing with faster mechs.

Once Takeru got the measure of the Blackbeak, his dragon mech surged forward and went on the offensive. Fadah had to rely on his shield to block most of the blows.

Before the dragon mech could press the Blackbeak further, the Slitherath quietly appeared from behind and tried to stab the dragon mech's vulnerable rear.

"Did you think I was blind? Your intentions are too transparent!"

The dragon mech spun his sword in a spin that deflected the Blackbeak away and left another dangerous rent in the Sliverath's chest. Raella's reflexes saved her mech again, if barely.

"Go away!"

"Screw you, doghead! I'm taking this bastard down!"

Both Raella and Fadah found themselves in a tentative uncoordinated dance against the indomitable Takeru. His dragon mech's specs exceeded the Blackbeak by a fair margin, though it still ran on energy cells so it was vulnerable to the same risks as the other machines that ran on the same source of energy.

This enabled the pair to exploit this weakness by constantly threatening to attack the rear of the dragon mech. Even if Takeru didn't think much of Raella, he still had to shift his attention to deflect her latest probe.

Dietrich tried to lend a hand but he never got a clear line of sight. The pirates had finally gotten their act together and sent out additional mechs to shore up the first wave of melee mechs.

Despite the precautions taken by the Blood Claws, mechs continued to explode in a disturbingly regular interval. Kanaan had largely lost control over his men as everyone fought for themselves.

Only the ranged mechs maintained some sense of order as they coordinated their attacks on isolated enemies. They didn't dare fire their weapons into the middle of the grand melee for fear of setting off a chain reaction.

Unfortunately, the pirates didn't hold as much scruples and constantly tried to aggravate the situation. This in turn forced the Blood Claws to allocate all of their ranged mechs to suppression duty. The pirate marksmen shouldn't be allowed to set off any energy cells with impunity.

Takeru's dragon mech suffered a few more nicks and scratches after a minute of back and forth. Despite being outnumbered, the pirate elite possessed enough skill to fend off both of its opponents at once.

"Hahahaha! Amateurs! Both your blades are dull! Without tempering your skill through life-and-death battles, how can you call yourself a mech pilot!"

"Shut up you criminal!" Raella roared as she pushed her anger into her damaged mech, willing it to slide the knife in the waist of the dragon mech. She completely forgot about the precarious risk of setting off an energy cell.

The pirate mech spun away in the nick of time. Takeru even left another sword mark on the Blackbeak's chest armor.

Fortunately, the Veltrex armor system held up decently well against the power of the dragon mech's sword strikes. For all of its speed and elegance, it relied mostly on technique and momentum for its bite. By pressuring Takeru from two directions, they prevented him from building up sufficient momentum for a heavy blow.

Fadah gained more confidence and started to regain some of the initiative. He didn't allow his opponent to wind up for one of his endless flurry of blows by making frequent but shallow attacks. He even struck with the edge of his phoenix shield to knock the dragon mech out of balance.

Takeru's mech started to suffer. Even Raella managed to sneak some superficial stabs in between the pirate's occupation with the Blackbeak. Takeru had to devote more and more attention to fending off Fadah's frequent attacks.

At some point, Fadah felt something deep within him echo with the Blackbeak he piloted. Their connection somehow crystallized in a deeper form of synchronization. The line between man and machine started to blur, but only for an instant.

Fadah made his move in that brief window of opportunity.

The Blackbeak surged forth at the swordsman mech's left flank. Takeru released a windmill chop that would have forced the Blackbeak to block with

its shield. Instead of taking the chop head-on, Fadah angled the shield in a way that put the brunt of the force on the rim of the shield.

This gave his Blackbeak enough of a push to swivel around and put more strength into its stab. Fadah's sword sunk into the dragon mech's joints. The thin, flexible plates of compressed armor only blunted half of the force in the stab. The remaining power proved to be sufficient to disable the joint between the arm and the shoulder.

"NO!"

Takeru's mech lost a significant amount of threat after Fadah succeeded in disabling one of its arm. Even though the dragon mech continued to put up a good fight with one arm, the mech obviously lacked a lot of power compared to before.

This allowed Fadah to be more unscrupulous with his attacks. The Blackbeak's sword and shield started to hammer the tough exterior of the dragon mech. In contrast, Takeru could barely bite into the Blackbeak's Veltrex armor with his feeble sword strikes.

It didn't help that Fadah decided to stick his mech close to his opponent's machine. The shortened distance proved ideal for the Blackbeak to attack with its one-handed sword.

The dragon mech meanwhile couldn't leverage enough distance to enable its longer sword to exert its full power.

CLANG!

The swordsman mech shuddered as Fadah shaved off an important armor plate from the dragon's mech chest. Its internals became exposed.

SHUNK!

At the same time, Raella took advantage of Takeru's shock by stabbing the Sliverath's sole knife into the shoulder blade of the dragon's mechs sole functioning arm. While her knife didn't manage to cripple the arm, the damage it inflicted had severed a couple of minor systems, which reduced the pirate mech's responsiveness.

"I will not fall on this cursed planet!"

"Oh shut up you pirate!"

Both Raella and Fadah went for the killing blow. The Blackbeak locked the dragon mech's sword with its shield while ramming the tip of its sword into the exposed chest of its opponent. Raella meanwhile positioned the Sliverath low to the ground and sunk the knife into the dragon mech's knee.

Takeru's mech lost its footing and much of its power. It fell down onto face.

"Get away!" Dietrich yelled. He'd always been keeping an eye on their duel as he fired his laser rifle in support of other Blood Claws. "He's going to blow!"

Both mechs retreated in an instant, already bracing themselves for the inevitable blow.

Yet instead of an explosion, the dragon mech's cockpit ejected from the rear. Its powerful short-ranged boosters took away Takeru away from the battle and back to the besieged pirate encampment.

"Damn it! He got away!"

Even though the escape spoiled some of the glory, Raella still felt good about winning against her first formidable opponent. She didn't mind too much that she needed help.

"Thanks for the help, dude. Let's go clean up the rest."

The fall of an influential pirate elite rippled throughout the rest of the pirate faction. Despite their fanaticism, the rest of the pirates couldn't withstand the determined Blood Claws.

Even the command squad from the Dragons of the Void suffered casualties and Raella and Fadah teamed up to dismantle them one by one. This time, they didn't let their pilots eject. They both aimed to take out the cockpit from the start.

After half an hour of intensive battle, the Blood Claws won the melee, though it cost them half of their melee mechs.

#### Chapter 298 Approach

The Blood Claws and their subordinate forces lost too many mechs from a single engagement. Even though the pirates put up a decent fight, the battle shouldn't have been so deadly to their mechs and pilots.

Ordinarily, mechs could soak a lot of damage. Even uncompressed mechs outperformed conventional tanks due to their mobility which allowed them to dodge or mitigate a lot of incoming attacks.

"It's this overcharge nonsense." Kanaan uttered as he saw the devastation in front of him. A field of craters and broken parts had been strewn before the pirate base that his men heaped their vengeance upon right now. "Any battle besides an ambush will result in a pyrrhic victory for whoever's left."

A few of the senior Blood Claws by his side nodded. "Our steeds have become our worst enemies."

"It's too difficult to guard your energy cells in a larger battle."

"We'll be turning our pilots into cowards if we allow them to eject too early."

"Mechs have turned into fragile scrap. Even the Mech Corps will run out of mechs by the end of the month at this rate."

Their first actual battle had taught them a lot of lessons on the devastating consequences of the overcharge phenomenon. A single change to the functioning of an energy cell had resulted in far-reaching effects for any force that fielded mechs.

The Blood Claws completely lost their appetite for further battles. None of the men found any glory to be had in the grueling fight they had just concluded. If they hadn't been compelled to attack the base by the 4th Bentheim Division, they would have never ranged this far from their walls.

"Alright, let's wrap it up here. Rescue any mech pilots that are trapped and finish off any pirates that are still alive except for the leaders. Have you gotten a hold of Takeru and the rest of the Dragons of the Void?"

"They ran away. They still hid a small corvette in between their carriers which lifted off out of sight behind that hill over there."

"Damn!"

Even if they stomped a dangerous forward outpost, thus reducing the threat to their base, Kanaan still felt sore about the losses.

Over the next days, the news trickled back to the Mech Corps and their affiliate powers. The Whalers especially took the news with a gut punch, because they lost six mechs and four pilots. Proportionally, they suffered the worst casualties out of the outfits that took part in the assault.

This time, the Whalers hadn't been able to drink their gloom away.

Ves quietly shook his head as he finished modifying the umpteenth mech. He developed an efficient routine that allowed him to come up with some basic modifications on the fly and implement them into the cheap mechs in three hours or less.

He had to cut a lot of corners in order to achieve this speed, but Ves succeeded in overhauling every mech in the hands of the Whalers within a week.

"I can't waste too much time in this base. The Whalers will be fine without me once I find a solution to the overcharge phenomenon."

Ves had devoted some of his off-time to researching what the Glowing Planet did to achieve this bizarre phenomenon. His current hypothesis was that some energetic exotic mineral emitted an all-pervasive energy field that changed the properties of stored energy.

The worst trait about the energy field was that it couldn't be blocked by anything. To test this out, Ves repurposed some tons of scrap and built a thick enclosure around a freshly drained and recharged energy cell.

The cell still gained an overcharge after a day.

If Ves couldn't prevent the field from affecting an energy cell surrounded by meters of alloys, then nothing else but some other exotic alloy would be able to block the energy field. The problem was that Ves had no clue what kind of exotics would qualify.

Walter's Whalers accumulated more than fifty different minerals from their mining activities over two locations.

The old site contained more active and more valuable minerals, but none seemed to possess any special interaction with energy.

As for the new site, it contained an entirely different mix of exotics, but again nothing seemed to stand out to Ves.

Perhaps some of these exotics held the key to solving the problem, but it would take too much time to probe each type of mineral. Ves needed a faster, surer solution than a gamble with exotics.

Through his casual studies and experimentation, Ves developed a number of approaches on how to tackle the problem.

He could invest in his Physics Sub-Skills and become more knowledgeable in the abstract fields of energy.

He could invest in Metallurgy and reinvigorate his research on exotics in order to come up with a new exotic alloy that might be able to influence the mysterious energy field.

He could also throw a Hail Mary and acquire some eclectic Sub-Skills from the Metaphysics tree. Perhaps a deeper understanding into the imaginary would be needed to fight against the unknown.

After lengthy contemplation, he rejected these approaches. All of them strayed too far from his core competence as a mech designer.

"I'm a mech designer, not a scientist. There's a difference between the two."

The former took the tools at hand and combined them in a way that solved the problem at hand. The latter wasn't content with the tools already available, and sought to explore new methods.

Neither approach was wrong. Both had the potential to come up with an effective solution to the overcharge phenomenon, and Ves had to take the approach that fit him best.

"Let's try it from an mech designer and engineering standpoint."

Ves called up a design for a typical energy cell.

Their design didn't differ too much from brand to brand. Protective materials and safeguards took up around twenty percent of its volume.

The most important part of an energy cell lay in the patterns and arrays that stored the actual energy. The cheaper cells used mundane alloys while the

more expensive ones incorporated exotic resources that drastically increased their maximum capacity.

As far as Ves was aware, the overcharge phenomenon didn't discriminate between materials. Both cheap and expensive cells suffered from the same problem, though with slight differences in magnitude.

Another correlation he found was that certain structures resulted in a less drastic overcharge than other structures.

Ves focused on the latter for a possible solution. "If I can play with this structure, I might be able to achieve a drastic difference."

He figured that most scientists and mech designers that had tagged along with the forces here would focus on the materials instead. With the abundant amount of exotics dug from the ground, they may be able to figure out an effective new alloy that could mitigate the phenomenon.

From the moment they heard about the Glowing Planet, the Mech Corps would have certainly brought along a lot of specialists who dedicated their lives to understanding exotics.

In contrast, they probably didn't think of bringing any mech designers or engineers who specialized in energy cells. In truth, much of the innovation with regards to energy cells had been kept in the hands of the large trans-galactic corporations.

Hardly any mech designers decided to specialize in something as boring as energy cells. They'd rather license an affordable ready-made design. After all, specializing in other components yielded easier performance gains and saved them a lot of money in licensing costs.

"What kind of Skills and Sub-Skills do I need to specialize in designing energy cells?"

The worst part about working on the Glowing Planet was that the Whalers didn't set up a quantum entanglement node. Neither did the Blood Claws do so for that matter. The Mech Corps forbid any communication with the rest of the galaxy and strictly prohibited the activation of any nodes on the ground.

Only the Mech Corps themselves enjoyed that privilege.

"I don't have the right to access the galactic net from their access points."

Ves shook his head and decided to explore another way. He returned to his barracks and entered his private bunk. After sealing it up, he activated his Privacy Shield and activated the Mech Designer System before navigating to the Skill Tree.

"Let's see what you've got."

With over 50,000 DP to spend, Ves had plenty of points to spend on various Skills and Sub-Skills. The basic ones didn't take too much DP to unlock.

"I'm already a Journeyman in Electrical Engineering, but I don't have a lot of Sub-Skills related to this field."

To be honest, he hadn't found a use for that Skill outside of coming up with new internal architectures for his designs. Ves made very little gains in this field ever since he forcibly upgraded it by spending his DP.

"It's time to make better use of you."

He found a couple of related Sub-Skills that sounded relevant to the issue at hand.

[Energy Storage I]: 400 DP

[Energy Storage II]: 800 DP

[Energy Storage III]: 1600 DP

[Energy Storage IV]: 3200 DP

Learning these Sub-Skills all at once gave Ves a much deeper understanding on the physical makeup of energy cells.

Ves understood what each safeguard did and how they prevented any shorting or accidental discharge. He knew why mech designers came up with a single size and format of an energy cell.

He learned the basics of how an cell could pack more energy by using different materials or incorporating them in different structures, alternating between conductors, superconductors, exotic conductors and nonconductive materials.

"This is a lot."

He turned from a novice to an amateur expert with regards to energy cells. Previously, Ves treated them like black boxes, something that was independent from his designs and should not be tinkered with. Now that he gained all of this new knowledge, he finally gained the basic confidence to tweak an existing energy cell.

"It's not enough to design a new one, however."

Ves lacked too much of the underlying science and engineering to develop a new energy cell from scratch. Fortunately, that had never been his goal from the start. He didn't need to reinvent the wheel. He just had to modify an existing one to the point where it stopped acquiring an overcharge.

New knowledge brought new understanding. Combined with his previous experimentation, he realized how impossible it was for energy cells to hold more charge than they had been designed to store.

"It's impossible. It simply doesn't work that way."

Yet somehow, it did.

He shook his head. Ves would get a headache if he kept obsessing about the impossible nature of an overcharged energy cell.

Now that he received a crash course about energy cells, Ves figured out the kind of Sub-Skills he needed to design or modify different structures.

[Conductors I]: 1000 DP

[Conductors II]: 2000 DP

[Conductors III]: 4000 DP

Ves gained a much better insight into conductors, superconductors and exotic conductors with this cross-discipline Sub-Skill. It elaborated on the Energy Storage IV by going into detail about the properties of different conductors and how modern energy cell designers squeezed more energy density out of the materials they had at hand.

"It doesn't help me too much with finding a solution."

As far as he knew, regardless of the material, as long as they conducted energy, they all became susceptible to the overcharge phenomenon. It would take a deeper dive into Metallurgy to come up with a conductive material that might be immune to the energy field.

"That's not the focus of my research."

Learning about conductors didn't just help him design better energy cells. It also benefited his insights on how to design a more efficient internal architecture for mechs. In that regard, he didn't waste his DP.

"It's not that relevant, though."

Still, he needed it to understand the actual energy storage portion of an energy cell. Combined with his other knowledge, Ves began to see the light.

#### **Chapter 299 Undercharge**

Ves hadn't spent 13,000 DP in vain.

The Energy Storage IV and Conductors III Sub-Skill provided him with enough of a foundation to take any existing energy cell design and transform it into something else. They also provided him with a promising approach on how to deal with the overcharge phenomenon.

"The Glowing Planet's energy field can't be stopped or blocked. An energy cell will acquire an overcharge whether they're empty or full. The energy field makes it so that energy cells won't let physics stand in the way of stuffing themselves full with energy."

What did this mean?

"I should just let it happen. The key is to mitigate the problem after it has occurred."

The simplest and most primitive way would be to drain the overcharge, either by siphoning it elsewhere or by using it up in a rapid fashion.

"I'm sure someone is already figuring out a way to do that. It's not very efficient or safe, though."

Dealing with such a deadly amount of charge risked courting disaster. Any excessive transfers also generated massive amounts of heat and stressed out any components involved. Mechs would require daily maintenance to continue to function this way.

Such a solution merely exchanged one problem for another.

Ves wanted to develop a more elegant solution. In order to gain entry into the fortifications erected by the Mech Corps, Ves had to present the brass with a new design that could impress them on the spot.

"Let's think about the structure for a moment."

Pretty much every mech-grade energy cell focused on cramming as much energy as possible inside its standardized volume. The materials and

structures used in the cell focused primarily on maximizing their energy density.

Ves wondered if a structure that prioritized a different goal would be able to achieve a different result. Every energy cell he encountered so far used the same principles to store their energy. They only different in the safeguards and the materials used, leading to a limited variation of structures that basically looked the same from a distance.

A couple of different ideas flourished in his mind. Ves opened the designer program and spent some time designing alternate energy cell designs using existing ones as the base.

To put it simply, Ves thought he might find a solution by lowering the energy density of a cell. In essence, he wanted to see whether the overcharge phenomenon could maintain its strength against an energy cells that had been purposefully designed to be bad.

He only spent half a day to come up with four different designs, which he further split up into cheap and expensive variants.

Compared to conventional energy cells, these deviations worked a lot less efficiently than others. They generated substantially more waste heat while holding much less charge in total.

"It's all well and good to doodle some new designs, but the only way to see if it works is if I fabricate some physical copies."

Ves left his bunk and went to the nearest workshop. The Whalers brought a cheap 3D printer to this expedition. It was the sole machine that could print new components if their mechs required replacement parts.

He unconsciously sneered at the sight. The cheap and awful printer had obviously been salvaged from a former production site. Lack of maintenance and overall neglect had degraded the machine to a fairly awful state. The

Whalers didn't even bother using it to fabricate most of their replacement parts, preferring to order new ones from another source.

"Well, it's not like I have anything better to work with. Let's fix her up."

He performed some superficial maintenance on the machine. The machine probably hadn't received so much care in a decade. Most of what he did amounted to cleaning the interior and correcting the alignment of any components that had shifted during intensive jobs.

Ves lacked the expertise to bring the printer back to its prime, not that he had the time to spare in the first place. "This should be enough to work with some precision."

He didn't place a lot of demands on the quality of his energy cells. He only wanted some proof of concepts to test out his ideas.

As some of the simpler components of a mech, the printer didn't have to strain too much to spit out the energy cells. It only took two hours to fabricate all eight of them. Ves ordered a couple of bots to take them away to an empty underground testing chamber he appropriated from the Whalers.

While it didn't matter if they held a charge or not, Ves charged them up to full capacity anyway in order to hurry up the process. After that, he set some automated measuring equipment before leaving the energy cells alone.

Ves checked up on his experiment every twelve hours.

The first time he checked in, he raised his eyebrows. Surprisingly enough, one pair of energy cells that shared the same design acquired an overcharge after only several hours.

"If I want to develop a cheap bomb, then this should be the right direction. It's a shame no one will want this. It's too volatile."

He carefully directed a couple of bots to lift the two cells and take them far away from the base. After that, he made some more adjustments to his rig before he left the chamber.

Over the course of several days, Ves continued to visit the chamber to inspect his progress. The other pairs of energy cells eventually became affected by the overcharge phenomenon, but different than last time, the problem became much less severe.

Regular energy cells acquired a charge that varied from three to seven times their initial capacity. In contrast, his experimental designs only acquired a maximum charge of two times its initial capacity.

Ves chalked it up to the tricks he used to minimize the magnification of the charge. He introduced deliberate inefficiencies to stifle any way the energy field could accomplish its physically impossible effects.

Some tricks worked better than others. At the end, the final pair of energy cells which incorporated the most radical redesign gained an overcharge of only a hundred-and-thirty percent, which was drastically lower than anything else he'd seen so far. It also took a lot longer for the energy field to affect these cells, as if it couldn't figure out how to manipulate it in its favor.

The magnitude of any explosive discharges from these cells would be severely curtailed. Ves virtually eliminated the hazards with this design.

While Ves should have been happy with the result, he didn't jump for joy when he ended his test.

"Why am I only able to achieve the best results with my worst design?"

The fourth pair of energy cells only carried a third of the energy of their equivalent industry-standard cells. That basically meant that each mech that ran on energy cells had to choose between becoming moving bombs or working with seventy percent less uptime.

Ves figured that most mech pilots favored the latter. "It's not that much of a problem to a defensive force. The Mech Corps can fabricate an abundant amount of energy cells and instruct their mech pilots to resupply more often."

It was a much more tolerable situation than to constantly worry about chain reactions. Even if his so-called undercharged energy cells sustained critical damage, the explosion wouldn't set off any other cells due to the low magnification and low base charge.

In fact, mechs would be able to safely and quickly use up the meager amount of excess energy in their normal operations. That largely made up for the pitiful amount of capacity of his undercharged energy cells and extend the running time of any mech.

His only regret was that he lacked the time to finetune the design of his undercharged energy cells. Ves had already wasted a lot of time with coming up with these new energy cells and the the seventy-day deadline loomed closer every day. He couldn't afford to perform a second round of research and development.

While Ves wrapped up his experiments and drew up a report, up in space, the Glowing Zone hosted a lot more fleets than before.

"Another day, another group of incoming clowns." Ghanso sighed as his mech lazily patrolled the a detachment of carriers positioned to intercept anyone that wanted to make a move on the Mech Corps. "I never knew there were so many rats in the Komodo Star Sector."

Old Man Alex laughed as his space knight flew beside Ghanso's Vhedra-S. "We're right up against the frontier. It's a given that our star sector is filled with criminals. I'm guessing that at least a quarter of the pirates from the Nyxian Gap have made their way here."

The amount of pirates that have reached the Glowing Zone had reached a disconcerting level. Many of them organized themselves around major pirate organizations like the Dragons of the Void. Over ten such armadas have already formed and made their way towards the Glowing Planet.

"Do you think the rumors are true? Are we really going to sign a truce with the Vesians?"

"We have to." Alex said. "There are too many pirates for us to continue our squabble. Even if we hate each other, we're not stupid. Any fight to the death will only benefit the scum watching from the side."

Besides their initial skirmishes, the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion completely gave up any attempt to fob each other off from the Glowing Planet. Too many vultures had gathered to continue their schoolyard spat.

They would rather allow their principal enemy to benefit from the Glowing Planet than to pave the way for lawless pirates to reap the ultimate rewards. For this, they buried the hatchet.

"All the armada's are on the move again. They'll be here within days."

"It took them long enough to get their hands on a batch of dimensional smoothers. How are they getting their hands on them? I thought only the government or the Big Two has access to that technology."

"It's not that much of a surprise if you assume the pirates are backed up by another major power." Ghanso replied. He couldn't help but add an ominous tone to his voice. "I've been thinking about what's going on lately. Did you ever feel that we're being stared at by another influence?"

"Not at all. Who the hell is crazy enough to covet the Komodo Star Sector? Besides our border to the frontier, we've got nothing that's worth a damn. Anyone who's stirring the pot is probably bored or brain damaged."

Even if Old Man Alex had a point, Ghanso still couldn't shake off the idea that the pirates secretly worked for someone else.

An alert sounded out, prompting Captain Rynsel to issue new orders. "Heads up! Our fleet has detected incoming stealth vessels. They've been very sneaky in their approach, but our sensors spotted them out. The Volari Starhawks have been assigned to intercept this unknown fleet."

"Do we know of their origin, ma'am?"

"Command is just as clueless as you. It's likely not the Mech Legion. We already have a fairly complete database on the kind of ships they use. It's either pirates, mercenaries or foreigners."

That didn't reassure Ghanso very much. His Vedra-S fell into formation as the Volari Starhawks flew forward in a very obvious intercept of the unknown fleet.

This prompted the sneaky bastards to drop their stealth.

"Detecting fifteen medium-sized carriers! They're deploying spaceborn mechs! They're turning around!"

"Hah! The cowards don't have the guts to face the Starhawks face to face!"

"They're also outnumbered two-to-one. Those stealth carriers don't hold much capacity. They look awfully advanced, though."

Captain Rynsel relayed another order. "Pursue! We've got the advantage in numbers and they're still fighting back against their previous forward momentum! This is the only chance we have to catch up to them!"

The Volari Starhawks descended on the latest fleet of outsiders that attempted to sneak past the Mech Corps. They already destroyed or chased away a half-dozen different fleets. The Mech Corps held the advantage for now, but Ghanso doubted they would be able to hold against the major pirate fleets.

## Chapter 300 Invention

Time was of the essence. Ves immediately entered the comm center and sent a priority message to the Mech Corps through the hardline connection that ran from the Whalers.

His message passed on to the Blood Claws, who didn't dare to delay its transmission in any way given the import of the claims that Ves had made.

Just a couple of minutes later, Ves received a receipt from the base commander herself. He had to sit tight and wait for transport. They wanted to bring him over to verify his invention with their own eyes.

Since this might be the last time he'd stick with the Whalers, Ves quickly sought out Walter and filled him in about his breakthrough.

"You really did it? That's great news!" Walter laughed and embraced the mech designer in a meaty hug. "We won't get to blow up anymore!"

Ves didn't have the heart to hide the designs for the undercharged energy cells from Walter. He passed the gang leader a secure data chip that contained all of the technical specifications.

"You can hand that over to any decent mech technician. They're easy to fabricate but it will take some time before you're able to replace all of your existing cells."

At least they solved this pervasive problem. Ves also granted the Whalers an opportunity to butter up to the Blood Claws by presenting the designs to them a little early. The sooner everyone replaced their energy cells, the safer everyone would be.

Ves and Walter quickly discussed some logistical matters. The Whalers dearly lacked some technical expertise, but this time Walter actually listened to the critique.

"I've been thinking about that as well. Our mechs fared worse than the others in the pirate base assault. We've got a lot of shaping up to do. If I hand over your invention to the Blood Claws, I can probably get them to lend us some of their senior technicians. Heavens know we need someone who can take over what you've done for us so far."

They parted with each other on amicable terms. Ves quickly packed his meager luggage and sought out Lucky who'd been digging for exotics near the mines. His gluttonous cat must have eaten tons of the stuff already, but he hadn't gained any weight at all.

"You must be chock full of energy right now." Ves grasped hold of his silvery mechanical cat. "We might be moving to the red zone soon. Don't run around randomly, okay? There's a whole bunch of military men running around there so you might be spooking them if you're trespassing into a restricted area."

"Meow!"

His cat appeared to look forward to entering the red zone. As for tripping alarms and alerting the guards, Lucky didn't seem to be worried about that. He only had more exotics in mind.

Fadah and the rest of the Whalers who raided the pirate base hadn't returned yet, so Ves couldn't say goodbye to the inheritor of his Blackbeak in person. Ves composed a quick message and addressed it to Fadah's comm, which would receive it as soon as it returned to the local network.

The only complication that remained was that Ves had to leave Melkor and his Stanislaw behind.

"It's fine, Ves." Melkor replied as he leaned against the foot of his mech. "The Mech Corps and I aren't exactly buddies since they cashiered me. It's best I stay away from their premises in order to avoid any misunderstandings. I'll stick with the Whalers and try to help out Raella whenever possible."

Ves felt reassured that Melkor didn't blame him for bailing out. "That sounds good. Don't forget the contingency plans. I strongly suspect this base won't hold against a determined attack. More and more pirates are descending upon the Glowing Planet. It's going to get awfully crowded soon."

They both heard the news that trickled down from the Blood Claws. Tens of thousands of ships had appeared in the Glowing Zone. Most of them didn't seem to acknowledge any authority except for their own. Even Ves could tell that the Mech Corps had no way of holding back the sheer number of pirates on their way to the Glowing Planet.

They said their goodbyes before Ves left for the landing on the surface in his hazard suit. He only had to wait a couple of minutes before an armored shuttle escorted by a couple of aerial mechs descended on the pad. A uniformed officer appeared from the hatch.

"Mr. Larkinson, please step inside. Do you have the samples?"

"They're over there." Ves pointed at the bots holding the pair of energy cells that fared best in his previous test. "I've already drained their charge, but it's best to handle them with care."

The shuttle sent out their own set of bots who grabbed hold of the samples with extreme care. They carefully placed the cells into purpose-built boxes before closing them up with an abundance of locks.

Once Ves and Lucky stepped inside and the boxes had been stowed away into the shuttle's cargo compartment, the shuttle lifted off.

Neither the officer nor the guards appeared talkative, so Ves remained in his seat and stroked his apprehensive gem cat. Lucky must be feeling apprehensive at being stuck inside a shuttle full of armed guards and countermeasures. It became clear to Ves that the Mech Corps treated his invention with utmost importance.

It didn't take too long for the shuttle to arrive at the center of the sprawling fortification in the middle of the red zone. The closer they got to the center, the more Ves become more uncomfortable.

"Over thirteen energy fields are being projected from the red zone." The officer commented when he noticed Ves having trouble keeping himself together. "As far as we're aware of, they have minimal effects on human physiology, but it will take some time to get used to them. The side effects will fade within a day."

Somehow, Ves didn't think the regular rules applied to him. His main source of discomfort came from his recently-diminished internal energy cycle. For some reason, something underground exerted an attraction on the energy. Like a magnet pulling metals from their place, Ves found that the unknown attraction field attempted to pull his internal energy away from his chest.

It hurt quite a lot.

He groaned a bit and tried to flex his body to cope with the changes. His energy cycle had become deformed, and it took quite a bit of effort for his body to get used to the new configuration.

"I'm okay." Ves waved away the officer when he approached to lend a hand. "I'm not a baseline human. My enhancements are going a little haywire from the energy fields."

"You should visit the medbay."

"It's okay. Let's get my meeting with the base commander out of the way first. I don't think she's patient enough to wait for me to recover."

An entire squad of armed guards took away the boxes that contained the undercharged energy cells. Meanwhile Ves received his own honor guard who firmly but briskly led him down to the underground city the Mech Corps had dug up with their advanced mining equipment.

The base was a veritable hive of activity. The Mech Corps constantly shifted men and mechs back and forth. Even though the overcharge phenomenon had turned every mech into a deathtrap, their pilots hadn't been deterred from doing their duty at all. Ves missed this sense of professionalism. The Whalers looked like toddlers in comparison.

The officer led Ves straight through a series of elevators before leading him to a command center which coordinated the Republic's presence on the Glowing Planet. Ves only got a tiny glimpse of the projection with the disposition of every force before they reached a guarded checkpoint before the office of the base commander.

Once Ves got scanned yet again, he was allowed entry, though he had to leave Lucky behind again.

"Remember, don't crawl off, Lucky. Stay."

After he made sure that Lucky understood the import of staying in place, Ves walked through the hatch and took a seat in front of a simple alloy desk.

The base commander appeared to be a typical veteran from the Mech Corps. The woman looked hard and she didn't bother to apply any cosmetic procedures to work away the wrinkles she gained from reaching middle age. Her short black hair had been bound up in a ball, thereby exposing Ves to the base commander's piercing eyes.

"Mr. Larkinson. It's not every day I see one out of uniform. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, Colonel Ilos."

"When I heard you developed a special set of energy cells that claim to mitigate the overcharge phenomenon, I couldn't believe how fast you came up with them. The full weight of the Mech Corps has bent around the problem for weeks. We've put entire research teams on the issue and we've even

contracted half-a-dozen different energy cell developers to present us with a better solution. You cannot imagine the amount of resources we've devoted to coming up with a solution."

Ves was very surprised to hear how much effort the Mech Corps put into their own research. "Has it paid off, then? Did you already develop a better solution?"

"Not... exactly." The Colonel admitted freely. "Efficiency has been low due to the relative lack of expertise among our own research teams. As for the developers, they're constrained by the fact that they have only heard about the problem second-hand. They claim that the overcharge phenomenon is such an impossible occurrence that they're having difficulty figuring out a direction for a viable solution."

It sounded like the energy cell developers might have other concerns in mind. Perhaps they planned on dragging their feet, thereby extracting more concessions from the Mech Corps.

Maybe they even signed a secret agreement with some other faction like the Vesia Kingdom's Mech Legion.

Ves was curious about the progress they had made so far. "What's the best solution your researchers have come up with?"

Colonel Ilos handed him a data pad that contained a classified document of a different energy cell design. Unlike the design formed by Ves, this one adopted the same conventional structure for the energy storage portion. The only difference was that the various conductors consisted of newly developed alloys formed out of exotics extracted from the ground.

"As you can see, our researchers suspect that one or more of the exotics underneath the red zone is responsible for the overcharge energy field. By

incorporating these suspect exotics into our energy cells, they believe that they can block or interfere with this energy field."

"Looks like your research teams are onto something. It's pretty impressive to limit the overcharge to two-hundred percent of max capacity."

"That's not as impressive as reducing it to a hundred-and-thirty percent. Even if your energy cell design is under capacity, at least my pilots won't be having nightmares about piloting death traps anymore."

An energy cell that contained twice as much energy still risked being blown up. With the amount of charge such a cell normally stored, the explosive discharge would have definitely been powerful enough to set off any other energy cells in the vicinity. What the Mech Corps had produced up to this point wouldn't be sufficient to negate the problem.

Only Ves had accomplished the goal that every research team assigned to the problem had been trying to figure out. While he didn't doubt that the energy cell developers would have come up with a similar solution, even a week's delay could lead to another disaster on the battlefield.

The next wave of pirates and fortune seekers were about to descend on the increasingly crowded Glowing Planet. Battle could not be avoided any longer. The sooner the Mech Corps switched their energy cells, the faster they regained their confidence.

"As you know, I didn't present you with these energy cells for free." Ves laid out his intentions. "Can you grant me a couple of favors?"

The colonel considered his request. "We can't promise you anything, but I'll do my best to satisfy your wishes."

So far, Colonel Ilos had been remarkably friendly to Ves. He chalked it up to offering up his energy cell design upfront without any delays. That action alone bought him a lot of good will.

Still, Ves sensed his family name helped a lot as well. Some people in the Mech Corps respected any Larkinson by their lineage alone, while others hated their family to the bones. Colonel Ilos probably fell into the former group, which happened to be very convenient at this moment.

"You see, I have a couple of things in mind, ma'am."