

### Chapter 301 Red Zone

Ves didn't dare be too greedy in his demands. He started with the most critical and important request. "I'd like to be a part of the mining expedition that seeks to extract the resources buried close to the core of the planet."

As soon as he mentioned the core, Colonel Ilos turned sharp. She completely shed her friendly expression. "Where did you hear about our deep mining operations?"

"I've been assigned to retrieve something valuable from the core." Ves quickly responded. "As you know, I'm apprenticed to Master Carmin Olson, who's currently a guest professor of the Leemar Institute of Technology. As her subordinate, I'm sometimes called to take care of business on her organization's behalf."

What he said was all true, but Ves deliberately mixed his actual meaning. His first sentence about being assigned to retrieve an ore from the core of the planet had been true, but he didn't explicitly state that he received this mission from the System.

What he said after that had no relations with what he said earlier, but by stringing these two sentences together, he weaved the illusion that Master Olson had actually given him this assignment.

Ves had become increasingly more adept to cover for the System and lie in a way that wouldn't trip any lie detectors hidden in the colonel's office.

"If it's behalf of an eminent Master Mech Designer, then I'm sure we can accommodate our request." The woman nodded with some reluctance. "As you know, the Glowing Planet is an exceedingly rare product of the galaxy. According to past records that none but the most highly placed individuals have access to, the core of such planets often hide great wonders."

"I'm aware of the value buried deep underneath." Ves nodded sagely, though he actually didn't have a clue. He just ran with his speculations in order to appear more authoritative on the subject and deflect any suspicions. "My master has only requested for me to retrieve a hand-sized sample of the only ore that matters. I hope that isn't too much to ask."

The colonel looked fairly troubled. "It might take some time as we'll probably encounter grains at first. It's a shame we don't have the time to excavate the entire treasure before the Coalition and the Hegemony descends on this planet. We might have to accelerate our digging operations to fulfill your master's demand."

It sounded like Ves demanded something really big. Some exotics held a lot of value if they came in a larger chunk. It seemed this mineral from the core of the planet must hold an exceptional amount of value as a result.

Ves relayed some other favors, though he certainly restrained his greed this time. He mainly requested free passage through the non-restricted areas of the base and gain permission for Lucky to roam around independently in these same regions as well.

"There's no reason for your mechanical pet to depart from your side." Ilos responded to the last point. "Your pet is already a security risk when you brought it here. I can tell it's an advanced machine, so I'm willing to give it the benefit of the doubt and allow it to stay by your side. I will not grant it permission to roam the base without your supervision."

"That's fair. Thank you for allowing my pet to stay with me. He's something of my bodyguard as well."

He couldn't hide Lucky's deadly armament from the Mech Corps. Not only did Lucky possess a record of killing pirates, his cat didn't appear too different from the deadly bodyguard pets assigned to little boys and girls. Though these

pets always risked being hacked, it wasn't a big concern in a hugely advanced first-rate superstate.

Ilos even showed signs of envy that Ves owned a pet that looked like it had been shipped straight from the New Rubarth Empire.

Ves didn't retain enough leverage to demand more concessions from the base. Colonel Ilos had already indulged him enough and he didn't wish to waste his remaining goodwill. He only asked for a slightly higher security clearance and to be kept informed about the development of better energy cells.

"I think that's enough for today." The colonel wrapped up the meeting. "My men will show you to your bunk where you can stow your luggage. You're free to roam the non-restricted areas of the base such as the mess hall, but you're not allowed to enter the workshops or mech stables and disturb the technicians at work."

"I understand." Ves hadn't been drafted yet. As a civilian, Ves had no right to butt in and tell the mech technicians how to do their work. He wasn't even allowed to study the predominant designs the 4th Bentheim Division currently employed. "Do I have permission to enter the labs where the new energy cells are being developed?"

"Only if you receive permission from the lab."

In other words, not likely. Ves had upstaged all of those research departments, after all. They must be cursing his name under their breaths right now.

Ves left the base commander's office after that. After retrieving Lucky, another officer led him upwards to a less restricted part of the underground complex.

"We've sent a partial map of this base to your comm. You should be able to find your bunk on your own. Do you have any more questions?"

"Yeah. Am I allowed to step outside?"

"No. For security reasons, you are only permitted to remain underground. The only personnel allowed above ground are mechs."

Ves nodded and left for his bunk. After reaching it, he dropped off his luggage before dropping to his bed. All the while, he continued to hold on to Lucky, though his cat appeared rather grumpy at this moment.

"Hey, don't blame me. The Mech Corps can be rather high strung about security risks. Tell you what. When I visit the deep mining expedition tomorrow, I'll see if I can get you something yummy. The mining operation must be yielding a lot of ores if it's aiming to reach the core of the planet."

"Meow." Lucky brushed his head against his chin.

Even with the technology the Mech Corps had at their disposal, it wasn't easy to bore down towards the center of a planet. That didn't even take into account the complications of burrowing through layers and layers of exotics, each of which could set off a deadly accident.

The base still needed to process his permissions, so he couldn't visit the mining operations right now. Ves left his bunk and roamed around the corridors, trying to get a first-hand impression of the famed and renowned Mech Corps.

As the premier mech force of the Bright Republic, the Mech Corps had been held up as the standard bearer of their state. Billions of citizens worshipped the Mech Corps and millions more pilots wished to join their ranks.

Looking at the people and mechs walking back and forth, Ves found that each of them held a distinctive pride. They felt proud to be a part of the Mech Corps. They also moved with much more enthusiasm than usual. Ves eavesdropped on some of the conversation and knew that his invention had made a splash.

"Hey, did you hear? Someone came up with a fix for the overcharge problem! Every workshop has been tasked with producing as much of these cells as possible!"

"What? Really? We finally don't have to tempt fate every time we enter our mechs? That's amazing!"

"You know what's even more weird is that some outsider came up with the new designs. From what the geeks have told me, the designs came from a mech designer who worked for a gang!"

"No way, a frickin' scumbag came up with the new designs? What are our eggheads doing?! How can they be so slow that some random criminal can figure out a solution first?"

"Hey, don't raise your tone so much. I heard the inventor isn't some random thug. He's actually a mech designer, and he's a Larkinson as well!"

That particular revelation landed like a bomb to the group of gossipers.

"Didn't that guy come up in the news recently?"

"Have you already forgotten about the duel where Captain Vicar got his butt kicked by a girl from the Planetary Guard?"

"Oh yeah, that duel! So the Larkinson who came up with the new energy cells designed that black mech as well?"

"Yup, and he'll be sticking around the base, though I don't know why. It's going to get really dangerous here soon."

Talk like that had spread throughout the base. Even though no one recognized Ves, most people had been able to figure out his identity because he wore civilian clothes. Most of the other consultants consisted of scientists and experts who specialized in discovering the properties of unknown exotics.

Only Ves looked young enough to be a mech designer at the start of his career.

This didn't affect the base personnel very much. The soldiers had a lot of other things on their plate to divert some time to fawn over Ves. After reading everyone's mood, he decided he should visit a doctor.

Ves followed the map to the nearest medical center. Upon entering it, he reported his issues and had to wait half an hour before a doctor came up to receive him. The jolly-looking man invited him to his office.

"I've consulted your records and I must say it's an usual case." The doctor said. "We are not very versed with the functioning of your extra organs."

"I'm aware how hard it is to figure out my body. I'm not asking for an explanation. I just want something that can mitigate the negative side effects of all of the energy fields in the red zone."

The doctor's expression turned pensive. "That will be difficult. Any medicine we give you can have the opposite effect. The side effects may be worse than the affliction."

"Just do the best you can."

Ves had to undergo a series of elaborate scans, much of it didn't reveal anything new, though Ves found his strength had decreased. Ever since the ghost that wore his mother's face drained him of his excess energy, Ves had started to feel less energetic. The difference didn't amount to much, but it pointed out that any further energy drains could lead to more severe effects.

The doctor in charge of his case found the changes to be puzzling. "You are still in fine health, Mr. Larkinson. I will prescribe you with some medicine that will ease your internal discomfort, but without a deeper understanding of your alien genes, it's unwise to add anything else."

That meant that Ves would have to deal with whatever happened on his own. This was the burden all human-alien hybrids had to go through.

He'd also have to endure anything the Glowing Planet decided to throw at him. From his limited understanding, Ves believed that he'd face much more active exotics the deeper he went underground.

Even so, Ves refused to stay near the surface and twiddle his thumb. The System gave him a mission, and he had to accomplish it at all costs. Even if he had to suffer through torture, Ves was determined to be among the first to breach the core of the planet and secure a valuable ore from within.

"There's no telling if the miners will withhold such a valuable chunk of ore. It'll be harder for the Mech Corps to refuse to hand any of it over when I'll be there on the spot."

Ves thanked the doctor and left the medical center. He thought about visiting the workshops before he reminded himself that he'd been prohibited to enter them. He felt a little regretful for not being able to place his hands on the mechs used by the Mech Corps. Ves had been drooling at their designs for many years now.

"Well, it's only a matter of time before I get drafted. I'll have plenty of opportunity to play with these mechs once the war finally starts."

### **Chapter 302 Gregarious Wrath**

The Mech Corps brought out the big guns from the start when it came to mining. Besides bringing enough hardware to empty out the surface layers of red zone in a matter of months, they also brought an enormous cruiser-sized tunneler to breach the hardy soil of the Glowing Planet and reach the core of the planet.

A vertical shuttle descended quickly down the depths of the tunnel that had been excavated rather recently. Ves looked out of the porthole with wonder.

"Aye, that's the Gregarious Wrath at work." A cadet bragged to Ves. "She's two kilometers long, of which two-thirds are solely devoted to making her the best tunneler in the Republic."

Such a name would have been more fitting on a battleship than an enormous tunneling machine, Ves thought. "How far has she reached?"

"Around five-hundred kilometers. We've encountered a lot of obstacles on our way to the core. Some of the bedrock the Wrath has bumped into is too hard to burrow through, so she's forced to take a detour. That takes up most of the time. Besides that, sometimes weird stuff happens, forcing some important systems to become a little wonky. We have to shut off the entire machine if that happens."

"I understand. It's too risky to keep working under those conditions. Who knows what kind of risks we'll face if we brave the energy fields without understanding their effects."

As if to emphasize those words, his stomach suddenly turned. The nauseous feeling almost prompted Ves to cough up his breakfast.

"What is that?"

"Beats me." The cadet shrugged. "The scientists have a fancy name for it, but we just call it the stomach turning field."

Over the next half hour, the entire shuttle passed through multiple short-ranged energy fields which each caused some form of debilitating effect to the shuttle or its occupants.

"How is the Gregarious Wrath able to function with all of these energy fields?!"

"It helps that we put three dimensional smoothers at different points of her hull. They counteract or dampen most of these weird fields somehow."

Even then, some of proximity effects couldn't be fought against at all. Humanity still had a long way to go in understanding the effects of each different exotic material the galaxy had spawned

Of course, Ves had no doubt that the big trans-galactic organizations like the MTA and CFA possessed the most complete database of exotics. In their eyes, the Glowing Planet likely held no secrets. The same went for the first-rate superstates like the Terrans and the Rubarthans.

On the other hand, the petty states that eked out a poor existence in the galactic rim had no chance to develop such a complete record. Knowledge was valuable, and a detailed understanding of rare exotics even more so. The Republic couldn't find a single party in the galactic net that would be willing to sell such valuable information, at least not without paying a ruinous price.

Thus, the scientists and researchers aboard the Gregarious Wrath had to stumble about in the dark and forge their own paths.

Perhaps no one on the shuttle had been more sensitive about the abundant amount of exotics buried in all directions than Lucky. The mechanical cat had become annoyed that he wasn't allowed to claw his way out of the shuttle and start munching on the visibly glowing deposits of high value exotics.

"It's okay, Lucky. You'll get your chance soon enough. The deeper we go, the yummiest the exotics."

"Meow!"

The Glowing Planet truly held no threat to Lucky. Ever since they touched down, his cat acted like this entire planet was his playground and a paradise filled with endless food. Ves tried not to think how much energy Lucky had accumulated so far. It must be enough to surpass a tactical nuclear strike at the very least.

The shuttle took a few turns when it encountered the detours made by the Wrath. Despite her shape as a cylinder, the Wrath incorporated accordion-like structures along her hull that allowed her to turn like a worm.

Obviously, the Wrath had to use that particular function more and more the deeper she burrowed into the solid interior of the planet.

"Will the Wrath be in trouble if we encounter magma or some other liquids?"

"Are you kidding? The Gregarious Wrath is clad in heat and pressure-resistant compressed armor. She's as expensive as ten fleet carriers. No other tunneler is so extravagantly tough and durable. If not for the potential riches we can find in the core, the brass would have never risked sending it down the Glowing Planet."

This certainly added to the proof that the Mech Corps knew what to expect down at the core. Ves might have to fight to obtain his deserves share of the mysterious ore demanded by the System.

"Ah, we've almost reached the Wrath. You better return to your seat and strap in. It's going to get violent soon!"

Ves listened to the advice and strapped down on the crash shield while holding onto Lucky. Even his cat felt something amiss and tried to find some shelter in his owner's embrace.

The shuttle shook harder and harder, as if it had a lot of trouble keeping up a stable flight. Even in an airless environment, some sort of pressure wave still penetrated the vehicle deeply to the point of straying from its straight and narrow path.

"What's going on!?"

"That's the might of the Wrath! Behold the Republic's ingenuity!"

The shuttle took another turn and came into view of the rear of the tunneling machine. Ves had to rub his eyes a few times while suppressing the shudders that ran through his heart.

The Gregarious Wrath looked like a massive worm more than a machine. Her dirt-crusting hull gave the tunneling machine a sense that she was a living, breathing mythical monster.

Even as the shuttle neared the rear portion of the Wrath, the tunneling machine continuously bore through the soil, pressing excess crunched rocks to the side.

"How is the tunnel so stable? Aren't we risking a collapse?"

"The Wrath is not that simple! We mix a little extra fluids that stabilizes the tunnel walls. It's not that expensive, but it takes up so much space that the Wrath needs to be supplied every four hours."

"Why bother keeping open this tunnel in the first place then?" Ves asked.

"As mighty as the Wrath looks like, she's a tunneling machine, not a mining machine. When she reaches the core, she won't be able to filter the truly valuable bits from the somewhat valuable stuff. It will all get pressed to the sides to form new tunnel walls. We've got to bring other machines if we want to extract the hard-to-find bits."

As the cadet explained the workings of the different machines, the shuttle neared a small opening that led the vehicle to a hangar. As soon as the shuttle entered inside the Wrath, the entire vehicle suddenly became subjected to a different direction of gravity.

"Whoa!"

"Haha, I forgot to warn you that the artificial gravity inside the Wrath is set alongside her length. It's the best configuration for us to be able to shift stuff from the bow to the stern."

Despite being a quintessential land behemoth, the crew treated the Wrath as a ship. From the terminology to the command structure, everyone treated the tunneling device as if she swam through land.

"Let's bring you to the chief engineer. He's been dying to meet you."

After being subjected to a strict security check, they entered the tightly compartmentalized interior of the huge machine. Besides the constant low thrumming, Ves hardly noticed that the Wrath was burrowing through tons of soil. It must have taken an immense amount of effort for her designers to isolate and neutralize all the various sounds, pressure waves and the shifting gravity.

Since they arrived at the rear of the Wrath, they didn't need to traverse the entire length of the tunneling machine. The Wrath actually held two engineering bays, but the Chief Engineer currently resided in the rear engineering bay which was responsible for powering the enormous beast.

A storm of activity greeted Ves as soon as he stepped inside the engineering bay.

Huge rows of power reactors hummed out of sight while bots constantly hauled supplies and tools back and forth.

The engineers that kept the Wrath running constantly entered and exited the bay as they had to perform maintenance along the entire hull of the machine.

Ves sensed the passion and drive in each of the engineers. The Republic must have recruited some of the best graduates to staff the Gregarious Wrath.

"Like what you see?" An older man asked from the side.

"It's like heaven here."

As a mech designer, Ves truly enjoyed the sights of people pouring their passion into machines. Even if they worked on entirely different mechanical contraptions, they still shared much in common.

"Ves Larkinson."

"Harmon Petrisc. I'm in charge around here." The chief engineer shook hands with Ves with a meaty grip. "That's a nice grip you have. Your hands are still too soft."

"Hah, we let our machines do the heavy lifting." Ves admitted without shame. "I'd love to forge a mech without resorting to a 3D printer sometime, but that's still a long way to becoming feasible. Besides, don't tell me you're not using printers yourself to fabricate new replacement parts."

"You got me there!"

To certain hardcore mech designers, they only truly appreciated mechs that had been built without any form of automation. Even though a 3D printer required a lot of skill to utilize, a mech designer didn't have to expend too much effort to perform a complicated function.

The chief briefly showed him around. Everything appeared to work the same as any capital ship, though the designers of the Wrath had added a lot of necessary features to allow the tunneling machine to stay powered under tough conditions.

"Thankfully we don't rely on energy cells to run the Wrath, though we still use energy cells to provide backup power and run auxiliary functions throughout her hull. We've been working hard to replace them with your new design as fast as possible. It saves us a lot of stress, you know."

"I can imagine. The Wrath must be carrying hundreds of energy cells at the very least." Ves nodded in understanding. "It must be giving you a lot of nightmares to think they could detonate all at once if the Wrath entered the wrong energy field."

Both of them turned grim at that possibility. Neither could rule out the chance that they could enter some weird energy field that had a devastating effect on the already dangerous energy cells.

That was why the Chief Petrisc showed a lot of appreciation to Ves. Hardly anyone else including the captain and the executive officer of the Wrath knew how much they tempted fate by keeping those overcharged energy cells in place.

Once they finished their little tour, Petrisc guided Ves to his little office. "From what I understand, you're only here so you can nab your share of the most valuable exotic mineral we're expecting to find in the core."

"That's right. I hope I'm not imposing on you."

"Oh, don't worry. We're so overworked that we could use a hand. What do you say about lending some of your expertise?"

Ves frowned at that suggestion. "That doesn't sound very appropriate. The Mech Corps doesn't want me to touch their valuable hardware. I'm still a civilian, after all."

"Ah, who cares about the rules." Chief Petrisc casually dismissed the concerns. "To be honest, we're so overworked that we could use anyone with a brain to help us out. The Gregarious Wrath has always been meant to tunnel through regular terrestrial planets. The Glowing Planet is a whole different level of complexity. Every new exotic we find results in another inexplicable malfunction."

"I see." Ves considered the suggestion deeply. If he refused the offer, he'd be doing nothing while the Wrath would slowly trudge along. "Well, I'm anxious to complete my assignment as fast as possible, so if you think I can help out, then count me in."

"That's great news! I've already prepared the permissions for you. Since you've come up with something as ingenious as those new energy cells, I'll put you to work in power management. It's not the easiest job onboard the Wrath, but our power systems are the most susceptible to outside interference. Hopefully your perspective will help us resolve these problems faster."

Thus began his work as a temp worker. Ves had never imagined that the chief engineer would accept him so easily, but he took it as another opportunity to broaden his vision.

### Chapter 303 Exper

The situation on and above the Glowing Planet had deteriorated enormously in the past week. Ghanso Larkinson spent more time in space than in the fleet carrier. Everyone only caught four to five standard hours of sleep, and some didn't even bother going to bed.

Right now, the Volari Starhawks battled a large fleet of unknowns who didn't consider the Mech Corps to be an obstacle. Unlike the other pirate fleets who constantly tried to maneuver around their forces, this strange group of carriers and spaceborn mechs boldly tried to bulldoze through the Starhawks.

"Who are these guys?! I don't recognize any of their models!"

"They're exiles from another star sector." Old Man Alex replied as he endured another barrage of lasers in front of Ghanso's Vhedra-S. "All kinds of scum are attracted to the frontier. These fellows must have come to our star sector to excavate some treasures before they decided to go for the Glowing Planet instead."

In truth, the Volari Starhawks outnumbered the unknowns, but the invaders obviously consisted of some elite force. Much of their mechs turned out to be second-class and possessed a distinctive edge against the cheaper mechs used by the Mech Corps. If not for their excellent training and coordination, they would have been smashed to pieces by the foreign mechs.

Watch out for those orange-striped mechs!" Lieutenant Fairfax warned.

"They've shaken off our elites and are heading in our way!"

Ghanso quietly cursed the foreigners. Why did everyone want to stick their fingers into the pie that represented the Glowing Planet. Was a planet's worth of junk exotics that much worth the effort?

The Volari Starhawks learned quickly not to underestimate the orange-striped mechs among the foreigners. Besides being better quality mechs that boasted significantly higher specs, their pilots all appeared to be advanced pilots that had reached their upper limits. Even though they lacked the deterrence of an expert pilot, so many elites gathered into a single squad could affect the course of the entire battle.

"Ghanso! Focus on their rifleman mechs! Suppress them as best as you can!"

"On it!"

The battle had turned into a wild battle for speed and maneuverability, which made it hard to secure a kill. The incoming enemies approached Ghanso's squad with so much acceleration that his Vhedra-S only scored some glancing blows with its laser rifle.

"They're circling around us!"

Instead of clashing head-on against Fairfax's squad, the orange-striped elites took up a wide orbit around them. Ghanso kept firing calmly despite his disadvantageous position. The frequent skirmishes he'd been through

beforehand had polished his instincts to the point where he scrubbed any clues that he'd once been a rookie.

"They've got more rifleman mechs than us! I can hardly hold my ground here!" Alex yelled over the comm as his space knight took an increasingly more severe beating. "We should bring the fight to them!"

Ghanso agreed with his squad mate. "Alex is right, lieutenant! Please give us the order to engage!"

His Vhedra-S rapidly accumulated heat as its rifle spat out beam after beam. Most of them ended up splashing ineffectually against his opponent's superior armor. It took sustained hits on the same location to do lasting damage.

In a battle with such speeds, Ghanso found it impossible to accomplish such a tall order. His beam often splashed all over the place. Any pilot whose mech got hit would instantly juke in a spin or in a different direction. The more surface the laser beam affected, the shallower the mark it left on the armor.

"Captain Rynsel and her men are on the way! Just hold out for ten more minutes!"

As he fired another ineffectual laser beam, Ghanso glanced at the proximity map and noted ten incoming friendlies approaching from below. Everyone on the squad cheered at the thought of being reinforced. These elites had been hammering their rifles at their mechs. They wouldn't last more than a minute at this rate.

"Alert! High energy emission detected!"

"Incoming comet!"

"That's not a comet, that's a mech!"

A bright blue-white flare approached the section of space where Ghanso and his comrades fought against the foreigners. Their collective sensor readings

quickly resolved the incoming contact as an unknown mech of a unique design. One thing stood out the rest. It outputted as much energy as five heavy mechs.

"Oh mother! We've kicked the hornet's nest!" Alex exclaimed. "HE'S COMING STRAIGHT FOR US!"

The comet-like mech crashed straight towards Alex's mech. Its extreme relative speed hardly allowed anyone else to respond to its appearance in time. Ghanso narrowly engaged his mech's flight systems to back up, just in time to evade a narrow glowing stripe that passed just in front.

While the comet mech darted away, the space knight that had always stood by Ghanso's side suddenly parted in half from the waist before exploding in a violent conflagration.

"No!" Ghanso yelled as he couldn't believe how fast his partner's space knight had been killed. "Alex!"

Old Man Alex didn't have the time eject. His odds of survival was nil.

Captain Rynsel's squad suddenly stopped and turned around. "Fairfax! Disengage right now! You just got hit by an expert pilot! He's turning around for another pass!"

Everyone panicked when they heard they faced an expert mech. Lieutenant Fairfax swiftly ordered everyone to split up and flee in separate directions. Even with Alex's mech, the entire squad stood no chance of surviving against a single expert pilot.

"AArggh! I'm ejecting!"

One of their squadmates had to eject because the foreigners that had continued to circle around them took advantage of their loss of cohesion. The

orange-striped elites had shifted their aim so smoothly that Ghanso suspected that they must have practiced this tactic.

"He's here!"

This time, the expert mech slashed two of their mechs in quick succession. Only one of their squad mates ejected in time. The other perished when his mech blew up.

Ghanso felt immense pressure to eject, but he held back due to the obligation to bring back his machine intact. The Mech Corps took a dim view on those who wasted their expensive war materiel. He continued to pray that the expert pilot wouldn't target him next.

In the next couple of minutes, the expert pilot targeted their reinforcements. Captain Rynsel feebly tried to resist, but eventually had to eject.

Just when Ghanso thought he made it away, the expert pilot curved his high-speed trajectory in a straight path towards his Vhedra-S.

"He's on to you, Ghanso!"

"Eject already! You don't stand a chance against this expert!"

Ghanso didn't want to abandon his mech so soon. Even if his fellow Starhawks wouldn't blame him for the early ejection, it still would have left a stain in his heart. As a mech pilot born to the cause, the last thing he could tolerate was to carry a brand of shame. Such a shame had a high chance of affecting his potential advancement to expert pilot.

The Vhedra-S threw all caution to the wind and fired beam after beam at the swift and relentless expert mech. No matter what tricks Ghanso pulled off, the expert pilot dodged his aim again and again. It was as if the expert read his mind!

Even then, Ghanso never gave up his attempt to land a single hit. He even increased his rifle's rate of fire to a ruinous level. Even if he stopped firing right now, both his mech and his rifle had been ruined irrevocably.

Ghanso didn't care. His mind sublimated during the brief interval as the expert mech came closer and closer. He vented his grief for losing Alex and his fellow squad members through his weapon. Each laser that struck out into the vacuum of space was another defiant scream to the unfairness of facing an expert pilot without support.

"Come on! I need a hit! Just one hit!"

In the final three seconds, Ghanso had become so fired up that his mind momentarily breached an invisible barrier. At that moment, a spark of flame exploded within him that guided his aim towards another direction.

His laser only scorched the expert mech for 0.15 seconds. The incredibly skilled expert swiftly adjusted his course before the laser could even begin to burn away the outer coating.

"Pull out!"

This time, Ghanso listened to the communication channel. He sent out a mental command which instantly disconnected the cockpit from the rest of the mech. The sudden loss of connection jarred Ghanso sufficiently that he didn't witness his cockpit escaping from the mech in time for the expert pilot to slash through the rest of the frame in a single slash.

Instead, as soon as he recovered, he laughed. "Hahahaha! I scored a hit! I scored a single hit!"

As his cockpit flung away from the battle and followed an arcing course to the rear lines of the Starhawk fleet, Ghanso laughed and cried at the same time. He laughed for surviving an encounter against a dread expert pilot, and he cried for the friends he would never be able to see again.

"Damn this Glowing Planet? It would have done this galaxy a favor if it came across a black hole and disappeared beyond its event horizon."

Battles erupted across the entire orbit of the Glowing Planet. The Vesians had also been hard-pressed to hold back as many pirates as possible. In the meantime, hordes of pirates and mercenaries slipped through the gaps and descended to the surface of the Glowing Planet.

Battle raged throughout the airless skies above the rogue planet. The pirates fought against the mercenaries, the mercenaries fought against the military, the military fought against the pirates, and the pirates fought among themselves.

Infighting was rife even among allies in the same fleet. It only took a couple of stray shots to splash against a nominal allied outfit to provoke a brawl. Even the pirate lords that browbeat the small outfits together couldn't alleviate the constantly rising tempers.

Broken mechs and chunks of space ships kept descending from above in regular numbers. Back at the base erected by Walter's Whalers, their turrets sporadically fired at an incoming artificial meteorite from above.

Sometimes, even the rifleman and cannoner mechs had to lend a hand in order to break apart a particularly large piece of spaceship debris.

Still, that was child's play compared to the incoming pirates. Sometimes, elements of a pirate fleet got so confused that they lost their course and landed somewhere close to the red zone occupied by the Mech Corps. Any mech carriers that landed in the vicinity of the Blood Claws and the Whalers had to be destroyed before they could get away.

"You've improved!" Fadah complimented Raella as she swiped the head off a pirate mech in a single blow. "It was just last week when you could barely hold on against a single pirate."

"That scum was an elite!" Raella spat back as her Sliverath danced around the disarrayed pirate mechs with as much grace as the Blackbeak. The two made for an intimidating pair, and together with Dietrich's long-ranged support they developed a practiced routine. "I'm hungry. I hadn't been able to eat my lunch all day. Let's wipe these bastards out fast before I starve to death!"

The mechs aligned to the Bright Republic fought without holding anything back. Ever since Ves submitted his undercharged energy cell designs, every mech received the new energy cells. While the mech pilots faced a couple of complications due to their lower capacity and unstable energy supply, they all sighed in relief because they wouldn't get blown up anymore.

Naturally, such a momentous development couldn't be kept to themselves. The Mech Legion somehow got ahold of the designs and began producing their own replacement energy cells.

Some of the other well-connected factions such as the Dragons of the Void followed suit.

This had divided the forces on the planet in three.

First came the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion who had fully converted their energy cells to the safer designs.

Second were the poorer pirate outfits and mercenary corps who didn't possess enough connections to get their hands on the valuable designs for the safer energy cells.

Third were the incoming pirates, mercenaries and treasure hunters who just descended upon the planet. Since they hadn't been subjected to the surface energy fields for long, their energy cells hadn't developed an overcharge yet. This would change in the next couple of days, but until then they swaggered around their landing sites, provoking trouble wherever they went.

Thus, the Blood Claws and the Whalers constantly had to fight the smaller outfits while the Mech Corps mopped up the largest concentration of scum. After fighting multiple battles, everyone started to feel the strain.

### Chapter 304 Best Intentions

Countless mechs had been deployed to the surface of the Glowing Planet. Of all the different models, certain ones stood out from the rest.

For example, take the Havalax. Dumont's debut design might not be the most valiant offensive knight, but some mercenaries didn't care about the bad reputation it had acquired as long as they received enough discounts.

They brought their newly purchased mechs to the Glowing Planet and expected to dominate in any close-ranged engagements. What they actually experienced was nothing of the sort.

"This is ridiculous! How come it's run out of energy so quickly!" One mercenary cursed as his mech switched to ultra-low power consumption mode after all of its energy cells had been drained. "These new undercharged energy cells are so stupid! How can I keep running my mech with just thirty percent of its previous capacity?"

Some of his colleagues laughed over the communication channel. "Serves you right. I told you so that you'd regret spending the company credits on the Havalax. Even with normal energy cells it can't even last a single duel!"

To be fair to the Havalax, the duel had been something of an anomaly. The Havalax should easily be able to last half a standard day at normal power consumption.

However, such a meager amount of operating time wasn't as impressive as other mechs who would easily be able to last an entire day without replenishing their energy cells.

"This thing is a giant trap. It's great in a battle, but it's awful everywhere else. I'm going to put it up for sale as soon we get back."

While the couple of Havalax pilots grumbled about the poor performance of its design on the Glowing Panet, the pilots of the Blackbeak enjoyed their greatest moments.

As one of the few fuel-based mechs on this planet, they faced very little risks from the start. The constant skirmishes and occasional long-ranged raids also helped the Blackbeak fit in. The handful of mercs who piloted the exclusive gold-label Blackbeaks all performed above and beyond their usual standard.

For example, on a desolate field of crags and low rocks, ten pirate mechs were frantically running away. One might expect those ten mechs to be chased by a squad or platoon of mechs, but in actuality only a single Blackbeak hounded them from behind.

"This monster! Why won't he give up!!" A pirate moaned. "C'mon, run faster!"

None of the pirates seem to suggest they turn around and gang up on the Blackbeak. They already tried that, only to get demolished one by one.

"Let's split up!"

"He'll hunt us down one by one!"

"Are you kidding? He'll only be able to kill a couple of us before he loses track. Let's do it!"

The pirate mechs split up in different directions. Rather than bewilder the Blackbeak, it stopped holding back and put more power into its durable engine. As far as its pilot was concerned, the pirates had consigned themselves to death by ceasing to move in a cohesive formation. The Blackbeak hunted down the mechs like a cat chasing after a pack of mice.

"Keep running, you little rats. Even if you get away, you won't be able to supply your mechs."

Besides the handful of gold label Blackbeaks on the Glowing Planet, the silver and bronze label versions also acquitted themselves well. During the time when the undercharged energy cells hadn't been developed yet, they took the lead in defending the bases. Their strong, stable and exemplary performance had elevated their reputation to the point where most knight mech pilots yearned to obtain their own copies.

Many mech designs developed in recent years hadn't been tested in large-scale campaigns. The Glowing Planet served as a crucible where the best and most robust designs gained an edge over those which featured too many superfluous elements.

Major factions such as the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion collected all of the data to perform analyses and add to the public record of each individual model.

The highly encouraging realspace performance data of the Blackbeak gave the LMC an unexpected boost. Sales of the bronze-label model fabricated by EME, which had flagged in recent times, suddenly surged as the mech industry gained a new appreciation of its tough and enduring design.

The LMC enjoyed brisk sales as well. Along with a concerted marketing push, the Blackbeak had been pushed to the forefront of recognition. Silver label Blackbeaks became a hot item to well-off customers, so much so that Marcella started selling them by batches which the LMC's small workshop struggled to fulfill.

As the COO of the LMC, Jake Altern often visited Marcella's brokerage for business. Currently, they moved to an upscale restaurant and enjoyed a luxurious meal.

"Even if the Glowing Planet's appearance is a disaster for the Republic, it's been a boon for the LMC. The Blackbeak's appeal is at an all-time high right now."

"I know." Marcella replied as she finished chewing an exotic meat dish. "I don't even have to convince my customers to purchase a mech or two. Instead, I have to pull them back from placing too many orders. Both our bronze and silver label versions have a waiting list that's at least a half year long."

That represented an enormous amount of revenue. While both of them had much to celebrate for accumulating so many orders, none of them adopted satisfied expressions.

Jake stopped beating around the bush. "We don't have enough production capacity. Everyone in the company is aware of how much revenue we're missing out. Customers who have been hoping to purchase a Blackbeak are being discouraged by how much we've raised our prices and how many other customers are waiting for their own copies."

"Why are you bringing up this topic?" She asked with suspicion. "Both the EME and LMC are producing your designs as fast as they can. Neither of them are in a position to expand their production lines any further. The EME still has to pay back their debts while your company is just starting to break the ground on your new manufacturing complex."

"There's still another solution."

"You want to contract another mech manufacturer." Marcella stated.

"Exactly. Benjamin Larkinson approves of the idea. The rest of the board is behind the plan. As long as you agree, we'll have unanimous approval to extend a special licensing contract to Vaun Industrial."

"I recall that Ves once visited their impressive factory complex and didn't come out impressed. He won't like it if anyone else than EME gets to produce the bronze label Blackbeaks."

Jake helplessly spread his palms. "Well, he's not here to object, is he? Instead, he ran off to the Glowing Planet to mine some expensive rocks. At the very least, our decision here will teach him not to pursue his whims and go harrying off into danger."

It all seemed dirty to Marcella. She knew Ves always prioritized his reputation and hated losing control over the distribution of his products. Yet she wasn't unaccustomed to getting her hands dirty. As Jake had said, Ves only had himself to blame for being unable to stop a necessary decision to maximize the profits of his company.

"Consider me onboard to your plan. I own five percent of the LMC's shares, after all. The more the company earns, the better off I'll be. I can guess the Larkinson Estate is also eying the benefits."

This conspiracy couldn't have gotten off without the express approval of Ves' grandfather. Much of the higher management of the LMC consisted of retainers nurtured by the Larkinsons. Even if they worked for Ves, they still owed their loyalty to the organization that nurtured them from young.

Even if the LMC didn't issue any dividends as of yet, the Larkinson Estate still benefited enormously in other ways if the company earned record profits.

With the war about to come into full swing, the Estate always had a need for more money. That was the time when the Mech Corps spent money like water, and often had to go into debt. It wasn't unheard of for well-to-do families like the Larkinsons to contribute to the war effort in exchange for better treatment for their relatives serving in the front.

"Even if Ves objects, he shouldn't forget his roots." Jake decisively said as he began to eat his dessert. "Besides, Vaun Industrial is an excellent partner to work with. Their production facilities are top-notch and they haven't made any excessive demands. They're willing to pay a bit more fees now that the success of the Blackbeak is set in stone."

Both of them discussed the matter as if they had the best intentions at heart.

As for Ves, he remained ignorant of the proactive decisions made behind his back. Instead, he blissfully spent his days aboard the Gregarious Wrath. Chief Petrisc granted him a fair amount of liberties, as if he didn't have a care in the galaxy if Ves attempted to sabotage the giant tunneler.

It didn't make a difference anyway. With the amount of monitoring going on, Ves would never be able to hide any suspicious activities unless he activated his Privacy Shield.

Not that he wanted to. The Gregarious Wrath's journey to the center of the Glowing Planet had to go well for Ves to complete his mission. He did all he could to lend his expertise to the many problems facing the enormous tunneling machine.

It turned out that the energy fields constantly destabilized the Wrath. Countless systems relied on each other to ensure the smooth function of the tunneler. If one system got knocked out, that didn't mean the Wrath would stop. However, the systems depending on the functions of that knocked out systems might malfunction, which eventually led to a chain reaction of errors that eventually forced the tunneler to a stop.

Thus, Chief Petrisc prioritized plugging each and every gap as soon as they formed. Ves joined one of the troubleshooting teams and began to go back and forth along the Wrath's lengthy hull to fix various issues.

Most problems sounded a little inane.

For example, one time a cooling fluid storage tank suddenly burst because the fluid abruptly expanded. The entire mess fouled up the compartment and locked up the other storage tanks.

It didn't take too much effort to clean up the mess, but the engineers puzzled over what had caused the expansion and how they could prevent the cooling fluid from going haywire again.

Another problem was that certain alloys degraded as if they'd been rusting in corrosive waters for decades. This didn't matter too much if it came to a table or wall panel, but if the component happened to be part of a primary power channel, then the entire forward half of the Wrath might shut off.

It was the job of the troubleshooting teams to solve these problems before they grew into something big. While Ves felt like a fish out of water concerning the workings of a massive ship-sized tunneler, his excellent foundation in various fields of science allowed him to suggest workable solutions to the problems at hand.

"Look, why are we holding this portion up with an alloy support structure? It's overkill in my eyes. We all know that certain exotic alloys are reacting badly in the presence of all of these energy fields. I think we shouldn't shy away from replacing these alloy structures with plastic composites."

"If this was a mech, I wouldn't be satisfied with this slapdash fix. Everyone can tell this replacement part will break down the next day. Rather than return each day to perform the same repairs, why not overhaul this entire section. Let me sketch out my suggestion for a durable structure."

Several days went by as the Gregarious Wrath continued to overcome new challenges every day. With thousands of crew members on board, the tunneler had an abundant amount of talent to draw on to ensure her continued

operation. Even if she encountered another obstacle, someone would eventually come up with a solution to get the tunneler back on course.

After more than two weeks of tunneling, the Wrath finally stumbled upon the edge of the outer core of the Glowing Planet.

### Chapter 305 Bone

The Mech Corps didn't have much time left before their 70-day deadline came to pass. The Gregarious Wrath took much more time to breach the outer core of the Glowing Planet. Thus, the military moved very quickly to confirm they reached the periphery of their goal.

From the outside, the outer portion of the core glowing in bright green. It consisted of a virtually single gigantic mass of growing green junk exotics with just a tiny speck of extremely rare exotic material interspersed in between.

Sadly for Ves, none of the trace exotics happened to be the substance the System sought for. Even if a single gram of certain exotics could be sold for ten billion credits in the open market, none of them possessed any traits that could truly make the impossible into reality.

"So this isn't the right substance either, huh?"

Ves threw away the latest sample excavated from the core. After it bounced on the deck, it ended up in the clutches of Lucky, who eagerly began to devour it. The cat had been in bliss ever since they breached the core.

Chief Petrisc oversaw the maintenance of the Gregarious Wrath's drill components. After burrowing thousands of kilometers into the ground, the drill urgently required maintenance. Ves had nothing to do at this time because he'd do more harm than good if he involved himself with drills.

"This is boring. When are we going to go deeper into the core?"

"The Wrath will move forward as soon as we know the core won't ruin it. The deeper we go, the denser the bedrock. We need to replace the regular drills

with more expensive ones if we want to make any progress." An engineer replied besides him. "It's strange how most of the energy fields disappeared at this depth. It's as if the core is isolating us from the exotics up above."

Unlike other planets, particularly life-bearing ones, the Glowing Planet didn't feature magma or any form of liquids. After the planet's formation and its exile from its original star system, the magma had slowly cooled until it became fully solid. This gave the planet enough time to sink all of its heavier materials to the core of the planet.

The ore that the System demanded from Ves should also be found close to these depths. It would be impossible to reach the exact center with today's technology, but hopefully they'd reach close enough to start encountering the desired material.

"More tunneling and mining machines will arrive very soon to lend a hand. The core is largely uniform, but if we're lucky we might come across an easier side path. This entire planet is weird so who knows what's down there."

"We're also short on time." Ves added. "We only have less than twenty days to wrap up this expedition."

While he had faith that the Mech Corps would be able to hang on to the red zone, he had less faith in their ability to approach the inner core and reach the truly valuable substances that rested so deep. All of this was pretty much out of his expertise, so Ves had no choice but to stand aside and let the experts do their jobs.

He left the labs where the ores were analyzed after a time. Lucky didn't want to go, but the cat hadn't been allowed to roam on his own. "Stop being fussy. We still have plenty more days for you to chew on some ores."

Even as his cat yowled in protest, he carried Lucky back to his bunk and threw him on top of the bed. Ves followed suit and rested on its comfy surface while he rubbed his stomach.

Due to the unknown shielding effect, all of the energy fields no longer tried to disturb his body and his delicate internal energy cycle.

Over the past weeks, his body somehow accumulated what it had lost from the ghost. Ves hadn't expected his internal energy cycle to bounce back so fast. He wondered where the energy came from in the first place.

"It would be too banal if it comes from my food. I don't take enough nutrients to account for so much energy."

Perhaps his body absorbed it from the energy fields, or perhaps he drew it from some abstract dimension. Whatever the case, his body regained the same pros and cons as before. His strength increased to an unrealistic level while his body risked getting blown up if his energy cycle ever went haywire.

He even half-hoped the ghost returned to siphon away the excess energy. Ves deliberately found reasons to be alone, but his mother never came.

"What a neglectful parent." He sighed.

Ves looked forward to leaving this cursed planet. Humanity would never thrive upon such an active and chaotic planet. The alien species that took to such planets as easy as drinking water must be extremely formidable.

Still, it hadn't prevent most species from getting bulldozed or chase away by the human race during the Age of Conquest.

"Well, we're in the Age of Mechs now. We don't have the numbers to fuel a further expansion into the rest of the galaxy. We're already spread thin in the star sectors we've claimed."

Much of the empty and poorly-explored territories inside human space hid buried treasures. Treasure hunters didn't have to leave for the frontier to score big. Even at the galactic center, many new stars came into being. All kinds of stellar activity generated an uncountable amount of exotics at the heart of the galactic center.

Despite the hazards of living in such active regions, they generated an enormous amount of riches.

On the other hand, the Komodo Star Sector was so far away removed from those lucrative regions that it had to excavate the leftovers that drifted to the galactic rim. The Glowing Planet was just a little more exceptional than anything else that came to the Komodo Star Sector.

While Ves slowly drifted off into sleep, a sudden thrum ran over his body. His energy cycle receive a severe shock which prodded him back to wakefulness.

"What's that!?"

Even Lucky jumped up from his slumber at the foot of the bed. The cat arched his back as if he faced a giant dog.

Both of them sensed something amiss just then. Ves hadn't imagined the jarring sensations. After a couple more minutes of waiting, he let down his guard.

"Something's up. Anything that can spook the both of us isn't normal."

Ves freshened himself up and left his bunk. He headed down to engineering, only to encounter a flurry of activity. Ves found an engineer he became familiar with and asked what was going on.

"Didn't you hear? We've found 3 milligrams of Rorach's Bone!"

The significance of that news hadn't set in on Ves. "What's Rorach's Bone?"

"It's the entire reason we dug so far! Don't you know how priceless Rorach's Bone is? It can't even be expressed in credits! The Mech Trade Association has an insatiable demand for Rorach's Bone. It's said that it's an essential ingredient to make cutting-edge mechs!"

Now Ves understood all of the excitement. Any material that was valuable enough to be used in the best mechs of the galaxy should be extremely exceptional.

As Ves left the engineering bay and headed for the labs, he flicked open his comm and read up on Rorach's Bone in the Gregarious Wrath's internal database.

It only contained a brief entry on the material. Much of it had been redacted, and Ves didn't possess the necessary clearance to know any more. What he did learn was enough.

As a material referred to as a bone, the exotic substance formed an essential part in constructing a durable internal frame. Besides granting the skeleton of a mech an unheard amount of durability, the most amazing property of Rorach's Bone was that it drew in heat and used that energy to self-repair itself!

The entire concept seemed unreal to Ves. "So it's actually possible to make a self-repairing mech!"

Incorporating Rorach's Bone onto other components also granted them the ability to repair itself. Obviously, there were limits to this ability, but it granted mechs an unheard amount of endurance. Even if the cutting-edge mechs became lost, its ace pilots would still be able to survive with the help of his constantly replenishing mech.

Learning about these traits made Ves suspect something about the System. "Is it damaged?"

Certainly, Rorach's Bone didn't offer anything unique. Many other extremely valuable exotics offered the same amount of increase in toughness.

When Ves reached the lab, he got a distant glimpse of the so-called bone. It was just a tiny grain suspended in a vacuum chamber as the scientists performed all kinds of tests.

One of the scientists summed up their findings. "According to our analysis, this is a low-grade Rorach's Bone. It's lost its potency over billions of years of separation. While it's still a valuable specimen, the MTA won't get much use out of it. However, its presence proves that there should be larger samples of Rorach's Bone buried deeper within the core."

That satisfied the officers who had been sent to the labs to take stock of the latest find. The Mech Corps would definitely intensify their efforts to dig deeper into the core. Rorach's Bone was an amazingly dense material, so it would have sunk down deep into the center of the Glowing Planet at the beginning of its formation when much of its volume consisted of magma.

Ves approached the group of officers and made his presence known. "I hope to be informed whenever you've made another major find. Don't forget that my Master has already called dibs on the first major chunk of Rorach's Bone."

The scientists nodded, but the officers didn't seem so pleased. One of them stepped forward. "The Mech Corps needs all it can get. Everything you see here and everything we've achieved so far is accomplished on our own. As far as I'm concerned, the Coalition can wait in line."

As much as Ves sympathized for his home state, he wasn't willing to sacrifice his own interests. The System demanded for its pound of flesh and Ves could only cut it out from his own body if he couldn't present a fat pig.

Ves continued the pretence that he was here on behalf of the Coalition. "I would hope that you understand how severe your words may sound. Don't

forget that the only reason we're allowed to scramble in the dirt is because the Coalition has granted us seventy days to do as we wish. If they wanted to, they could have come within a month."

He hit a good point. As much as the officer wanted to stand up for the Mech Corps, he didn't dare speak ill of the Coalition in public. If someone recorded his words and spread them onto the galactic net, he'd be booted from the service in an instant.

"Come on, sir. We have business to attend." Another officer gestured the man. They all moved away.

"That's very brave of you, Mr. Larkinson." A metallurgist casually spoke. "Was it really necessary for you to remind them of their obligations?"

"It was. I have my mission and they have theirs. Mine just happened to supercede theirs. The Komodo Star Sector belongs to the Coalition and the Hegemony. The Bright Republic is just a tiny fish that swims in the same pond as the sharks. We should do everything we can to prevent the predators from eating us."

Ves didn't like these words, but he had to in order to keep up the pretence. He knew the Mech Corps would benefit enormously if they retained every piece of Rorach's Bone they dug up from the core. He hated that the System forced him to divide his loyalties.

This incident reminded him that the Mech Designer System never owed any loyalty to the Republic. This wouldn't be the last time he'd have to choose between the System and everyone else.

An alarm sounded out.

"Detecting anomalous movement!"

## Chapter 306 Devourers

The Gregarious Wrath primarily functioned as a tunneler, but that did not describe the extent of her purpose.

Many battles that took place on planets actually took place underground. While controlling the surface was important to control the local population and much of the smaller industries, the real jewels could be found at least a couple of kilometers underground.

While this brought a lot of inconveniences, the huge barrier of soil formed the most formidable fortification against bombardment, raids, infiltration and a host of other nasty consequences.

The main reason why the LMC spent half a billion credits on their production complex was because Ves wanted to create a giant underground fort. Considering the onset of war, such an extravagant precaution might definitely pay off.

In any case, with the proliferation of underground bases, a means had to be developed to strike them. After all, even pirates used underground fortifications to hide or withstand against the wrath of the lawful authorities of the galaxy.

Thus, Ves learned why the Gregarious Wrath adopted such a strange and aggressive name, and why the Mech Corps maintained such a large and expensive machine.

The Wrath performed the role of siege breaker.

As the anomalies neared the immobile tunneler, hatches opened up, allowing aerial mechs to emerge. Most of these mechs had their energy cells replaced by the undercharged variants that Ves had developed, so none of the pilots showed any hesitancy in sortieing out.

Meanwhile, everybody inside the Wrath went to their action stations. Ves had to leave the labs as well. As a guest, he should be returning to his bunk and hole up while the Mech Corps took care of the threat, but Ves wasn't in a mood to hide.

"I still have those permissions given by Chief Petrisc. I'll probably be able to enter the engineering bay."

Ves resolutely found the nearest fast platform and stepped onto its surface. The platform instantly zipped away along a special track in the corridors. Many other crewmen had boarded the same kind of platforms in order to quickly traverse the entire length of the Wrath.

His platform deposited him a couple of compartments away from the rear engineering bay. After going through another security checks, he finally entered it and found Chief Petrisc. The man occasionally issued orders while he kept his eye on a projected multi-pane interface that showed almost everything that happened inside and outside the Wrath.

"Ves, I figured you'd be here. A Larkinson never shies away from a fight! Come here and help me make sense of the readings."

Glad that he hadn't been chased out, Ves approach the command console and turned his attention to the proximity map. Twenty-five mechs made up of the first wave. Without a better understanding of the incoming threats, the captain held back the other mechs.

Also, the expanded tunnel around the Wrath didn't offer a lot of space anyway.

The deck beneath Ves rumbled a bit, and the reactors stationed at the center of the bay powered up.

The Wrath slowly powered up her systems and started digging again.

"Why are we tunneling again?!"

"We need to make more room for our mechs to fight!" Petrisc replied as he swiped his fingers across the projection, making adjustments on the fly. "The tunnel we've made doesn't give our mechs a lot of room to maneuver, and the Wrath is vulnerable as well if she remains stuck like this."

The Wrath slowly started to curve upwards. The recently deployed mechs followed in her wake. After making a deliberate course change, the Wrath now pointed upwards, leaving plenty of room for the mechs to meet the approaching signals coming from the core of the Glowing Planet.

"The signals are moving right through solid matter." Ves noted quickly as he studied the plot. "They're moving through both mundane and exotic materials like they don't exist! I don't think any machine made by man can do such a thing!"

Both of them came to the only conclusion possible. "They're indigenous life forms!"

Three strong signals burrowed through the core like it was made out of vacuum. Ves tried to guess at their properties and wondered if they descended from the native wildlife that had once roamed the Glowing Planet when it still orbited around a star.

As the three signals came closer, the Wrath's sensors resolved more data. Ves found them to be difficult to parse. The sensors failed to detect any mass readings or pick up any vibrations that indicated the signals burrowed through the terrain. Yet the amount of energy they held should be enough to power ten elite mechs.

"What kind of life forms are these?!"

"Whatever they are, they're heading straight for the Gregarious Wrath! I think that says enough about their stance towards us!"

The galaxy spawned countless wonders throughout its ten billion year history. Many strange and unusual life forms emerged from these unique conditions, and humanity had encountered billions of them during the Age of Conquest.

Many times, these indigenous life forms seemed omnipotent, but they all fell in the end against the might of humanity's inexorable rise. No one on the Wrath feared the approaching indigenous aliens, even though they possessed enough energy to riddle the Wrath from inside-out.

As Ves quietly tried to make sense of the increasingly detailed but incomprehensible readings, his mind inadvertently drifted back to the moments he met the ghost that wore his mother's face.

"They're energy life forms! They don't possess a material form!"

Chief Petrisc's face turned grim. He instantly sent off a message to the captain before he even tried to confirm the wild guess. "If those are energy beings, then we're in a lot of trouble."

Humanity encountered a handful of energy beings, whose existence in the material dimensions could only be sensed indirectly. It wasn't accurate to call them ghosts, but most laymen treated these intangible energy beings this way.

That was because they couldn't be hurt by a laser or projectile. Swords and shields flew straight through their transparent forms, though sometimes they didn't even show any hint of their existence. These near or fully invisible creatures harvested countless of lives, mechs and ships before humanity finally found the key to repel their cheat-like existences.

"Do we have an expert pilot on board?" Ves asked with sharp eyes.

"We do. Venerable Stanton Drake is standing by to deploy. The only problem is that the mech technicians recently overhauled his Fire Worm. It's a highly complex aerial striker mech that uses up a lot of power. Standard energy cells

won't meet its energy consumption so the scientists have been trying to adapt your energy cells for expert mech designs. They only managed to do so a day ago."

"It's been weeks since I released those designs. It's taken them this long to develop a new energy cell?" Ves sounded exasperated. "They should have consulted me!"

"You know how the Mech Corps works. Those scientists holed up in their research bases are pissed at you because you upstaged all of their efforts. They don't want to admit a single mech designer can trump over their collective smarts."

Whatever the case, the mech technicians in charge of the Fire Worm raced against time to hammer the mech back together from its semi-disassembled state. So long as the Venerable didn't have access to a mech tailored to his talents, he wouldn't be able to display his full might.

Ves didn't offer to assist, since he would surely be rejected. He didn't possess the right clearance to work with highly sensitive expert mechs. These mechs cost many billions of credits to make and often incorporated some of the best technologies available to the Bright Republic.

In any case, a dedicated team of mech designers and mech technicians always accompanied each expert mech. Ves wouldn't be able to add anything unless he became more familiar with the Fire Worm's design.

"How much time do they need until the Venerable can deploy?"

"Ten minutes. We have to hold out for at least ten minutes."

After several tense moments, the alien energy creatures finally emerged from the core. They appeared to be semi-corporeal, with a transparent green glowing body that evoked the image of an illusionary snake the size of three mechs stacked on top of each other.

Most notably, the limbless creatures didn't possess any sensory organs. The only thing that distinguished its front from its back was the gaping toothless maw that possessed some sort of attractive force.

When the mechs that escorted the Wrath finally opened fire, the energy snakes widened their incorporeal maws.

Amazingly, every laser, shell, projectile and missile sent in their way curved their trajectories until they ended up inside their maws, where they promptly disappeared.

"What happened?!"

"How can all of those projectiles disappear!?"

"The worms are glowing brighter! They're feeding off the incoming fire!"

The mechs soon received orders to cease fire. After failing to make a dent through ranged fire, a few courageous melee mechs flew forward to meet the giant snakes in close combat.

It quickly turned ugly for the Mech Corps. The mechs hardly thrust out their swords and spears before the snakes sped up and engulfed the mechs with their transparent bodies.

This time, the mechs hadn't disappeared. The snakes passed through the mechs as if they passed through a paper-thin screen. They completely dismissed the mechs that suddenly halted their flights.

After a few seconds of silence, the mechs lost all of their remaining power and dropped down to the core. The lighter gravity deep underground made the falls appear gentle, but no one knew whether the mechs could still restore its systems or if their pilots were even alive.

"They devoured all of the energy inside those mechs!"

"They're energy eaters!"

"Not only that, they can eat smaller solid substances as well!"

Chief Petrisc and the handful of men standing around him quickly summed up the traits of the energy snakes. Their existence couldn't be understood through a conventional lens. The abundant variety of exotics buried in the Glowing Planet spawned a bizarre form of life that brushed aside a well-equipped platoon of mechs.

"They're still heading for the Wrath!"

Chief Petrisc couldn't take it any longer. He raised his comm and hailed the bridge. An interference field automatically sprung into being that prevented Ves and any bystanders from eavesdropping on the conversation. Once the chief engineer finished the call, he issued an important order.

"Polarize the hull!"

The power reactors cranked up all of their power towards an intricate set of systems that caused the entire exterior of the Wrath to glow. The snakes halted their approach and curved around the Gregarious Wrath's strange new condition.

"It worked!" Ves exclaimed.

"Don't celebrate too soon. The Wrath can't stay in this condition for long. It takes a ludicrous amount of energy to maintain this state. I'll be forced to pull the plug in less than two minutes."

Polarization was a rare and underdeveloped technology in the Bright Republic. They expended so much energy that only their most important ships could be equipped with this option. Even if the Wrath possessed an abundant amount of energy sources, even those would be drained in record time if the tunneler had to maintain its polarization state.

Right now, both sides waited patiently. The snakes somehow sent that it took a lot of effort for the Wrath to keep up her polarization, while the crew aboard the Wrath tried to buy enough time for restore Venerable Drake's mech. Only an expert could save them from the devourers yearning to drain them of their energies.

Amazingly enough, despite the enormous power draw, the Gregarious Wrath largely held up. Much of the repairs and preventive maintenance done to the tunneler had paid off. Only a couple of auxiliary systems malfunctions as the Wrath strained to keep up its polarization state for two full minutes.

'How much longer until the Fire Worm is ready?' Ves asked.

"They need at least four more minutes! The mech technicians are already rushing their work as it is."

That was far too much time. As the final seconds approached, everyone aboard the Wrath held their breaths. Eventually, a lot of indicators on the status pane sent out alarms, and Chief Petrisc reluctantly pulled the level that shut off the polarization systems.

The Gregarious Wrath had dropped her defenses. The devourers already reared up to fly right through her meters-thick hull.

### **Chapter 307 Power of Resonance**

Close to the final moment before the devourers tore into the Gregarious Wrath, Ves gained a new idea. "Chief! Can the dimensional smoothers be overloaded?"

"Huh?"

"The dimensional smoothers that protect us from wrinkles in spacetime! Can their power be cranked up any further?"

"It's not that simple!" The chief shook his head. "We borrowed them from the MTA under punishing conditions. If we damage them in any way, there's hell to pay!"

"Well, the energy snakes are about to breach inside the Wrath, so I hardly think this is the time to hold back!"

The chief faced a lot of pressure with this decision. The devourers wouldn't give him enough time to discuss the option with the captain. His eyes hardened as he decisively took action. His fingers brushed across a couple of options in the projected panel.

"Let's see what happens if we dial the power up to a 150 percent!"

As soon as the dimensional boosters received an influx of excess power, they reacted by emitting vastly empowered restrictive fields. The three dimensional smoothers placed along the length of the Wrath ensured the entire tunneler became covered in this enhanced fields.

As the snakes finally reared forward, they bumped head-long into the newly empowered field. While they initially kept flying forward, the snakes quickly halted as their bodies warped out of shape.

"It's working!" Petrisc shouted with awe. "How did you know that would work?"

"The devourers look like they have one foot in the material dimensions and another foot in the other dimensions. I figure they are existences that straddle both sides in order to take advantage of their best parts. This kind of semi-corporeal state can only be maintained if there aren't any barriers between the material dimensions and the upper dimensions."

In truth, Ves had been thinking of a way to fight back against his 'mother' if she ever appeared before him again. All those hours of brainstorming eventually produced results, of which Ves applied one of them. The success of his measure strengthened his confidence against the ghost.

Perhaps his next encounter with his mother wouldn't turn out to be one-sided.

The snakes exhibited signs of deep discomfort. Whatever the dimensional smoothers did to solidify the local space, the devourers deeply behaved as if they got scalded by hot water. Only after they shifted back a fair distance did their bodies stop looking like they would fall apart.

"How long can the dimensional smoothers hold?" Ves asked.

"Not long. They have in-built safeties that will forcefully regulate their power intake after forty-five seconds."

"That's not long enough!"

"At least you bought us some time. It's all in the hands of the mech technicians that are putting back the Fire Worm together."

Ves had no more rabbits to pull out of his hat. Any other measure he could suggest wouldn't work due to a lack of means. Even his impromptu suggestion to overload the dimensional smoothers had been a fluke as he knew almost nothing about their properties.

As the seconds passed, the crew of the Wrath prepared for a ruinous outcome. Chief Petrisc ordered the emergency deactivation of all but one of the power reactors, thereby forcing the tunneler to a halt.

"Ten more seconds to go."

Sweat poured from Ves as he readied his own countermeasures. He made sure that Lucky stayed nearby before holding his fingers atop his comm. He would instantly activate his stealth module as soon as one of the snakes emerged in the engineering bay.

Suddenly, the status projection sent out an audible ping.

"The Fire Worm is ready! Venerable Drake has lifted off!"

Through a hidden hatch at the rear of the Wrath, a colorful orange mech emerged into the tunnel. Ves scoured his eyes over the frame of the mech and noted that it could only be the Fire Worm.

The mech appeared to be an aerial striker, though it actually wielded a combination of laser rifles and flamethrowers embedded in its arms. Forces primarily utilized such mechs to harass the rear lines of their enemies and disrupt their supply lines. Only rarely would any force employ aerial strikers in a frontal clash.

"Aerial strikers don't have the room to accommodate both their lasers, flamethrowers and flight systems. It takes too much energy and fuel to feed all of these systems." Ves mused.

However, the rules didn't apply to expert mechs. As long as a designer applied sufficiently advanced technology, all of those limits could be overcome.

Naturally, these benefits always came at a ruinous cost. The Mech Corps could only afford to provide these treatment to their rare and valuable expert mech pilots.

Ves always dreamed of designing a tailored expert mech for one of the Venerables of the Republic. Now, he'd be able to witness one of those mechs in action.

Despite weighing as much as a medium mech, the Fire Worm accelerated at a rate on par with a light mech. The lighter gravity helped somewhat, but the model's incredibly powerful systems enabled it to surpass ordinary limits without any strain.

It took seconds for Venerable Drake to reach the closest devourer. Chief Petrisc already ceased overloading the dimensional smoothers, so the devourers quickly recovered from their momentary discomfort.

At the Fire Worm's approach, the devourer appeared to be alert. Somehow, it detected a high level of energy from the approaching machine. The ethereal snake faced the Fire Worm with a gaping maw, ready to absorb anything it threw in its way.

The Fire Worm didn't play by its rules. Venerable Drake held back his fire and flew his mech past the maw in an arcing path. Only after his mech turned around did he open fire.

His bulky, sophisticated rifle spat out a trio of thick laser beams. They converged upon a single point on the devourer's surface.

Ordinarily, such a mighty convergence would have vaporized any mech in the way, but the lasers passed through the body of the snake without any effect.

While the snake kept turning around to face the Fire Worm, Venerable Drake kept circling around the bewildered devourer while trying to avoid the swiping passes of its two companions. The Fire Worm tried a few different configurations, but none of the lasers left a mark on the snakes.

It looked like the expert mech pilot had to employ his full strength to tackle this alien menace.

The Fire Worm's exterior started to glow red as some of its components started to resonate with some unknown influence. Its armor radiated so much energy and heat that Ves had an illusion that the Fire Worm caught fire.

"The Venerable is getting serious now!"

The main difference between an advanced mech pilot and an expert mech pilot was that the latter had broken through the limits posed by their genetics.

A good genetic aptitude only provided potentates with a decent start. Once they reached the pinnacle of advanced mech pilot, they had to evolve beyond

the parameters holding back the human race from gaining as much might as the pinnacle alien races in the galaxy.

Even four-hundred years after the start of the Age of Mechs, humanity couldn't explain how expert pilots came to be. Ves himself only knew of a couple of traits that empowered them beyond baseline humans.

The most important of which was that expert mech pilots gained the ability to resonate with exotics. Most exotic materials actually didn't react very strongly to an expert mech pilots, but a small portion actually reacted very strongly when an expert mech pilot made a connection to those materials.

This enabled them to bring out the dormant potential hidden deep within these exotics and perform various miracles that often seem like magic. The galactic net was rife with battle recordings where renowned experts pulled off feats such as teleportation and duplication.

One all-time popular battle recording even showed a single battle in space where over a hundred spaceborn mechs fired their rifles at a motionless expert mech. They thought the expert mech had somehow lost power.

They were wrong.

The expert mech woke up just before they pulled their triggers and began to glow in purple. Mystical lines ran through its frame as a concave field came into being.

By the time the lasers and projectiles reached the expert mech, they stopped and curved around as if they orbited a planet. The attacking mechs quickly got torn down by their own fire.

Such incredible feats had elevated expert mech pilots to the forefront of human society, even if they didn't show up in public that much. The more they showed off their talents, the easier it was for their enemies to develop countermeasures.

Right now, Venerable Drake had no such concerns. The Fire Worm's glow reached an apex, whereby the energy transferred to the bulky rifle in its arms. A module on rifle glowed resplendently white before the rifle spat out three white-hot beams that carried special qualities.

This time, the lasers struck the hapless devourer, and carved out a burning hole in his body. The energy snake reared back as if it had almost been decapitated. With surprising speed, the wounded devourer flew back, but the beams kept pumping more hurt into its body.

The rifle eventually dimmed after two full seconds, but by that time the devourer stopped moving.

"He did it! He killed the creature!"

Hope bloomed among the crew. Even though the Fire Worm expended a significant amount of energy to kill off that snake, only two more creatures remained. Despite the initial success, Chief Petrisc held back his smile.

Ves noted the chief's reticence. "You don't believe Venerable Drake can do it?"

"He's not a high-tier expert pilot. The Venerable deserves respect for reaching a realm that most can only dream of, but he can only fight on one to ten odds."

Even expert mech pilots could be classified in tiers. Newer expert pilots could generally beat ten mech pilots at once if they all piloted the same mechs.

Those that made a lot of progress in practicing their abilities eventually reached the point where a single expert could beat a hundred mechs at once, but only if they piloted a mech tailored to their talents.

While Venerable Drake piloted a fitting mech, he hadn't gained enough time to become a top-tier expert pilot. Still, the expert didn't flinch from his duty. The Fire Worm turned around to face the two devourers that had become enraged

at their companion's death. Their speed grew to the point where the Fire Worm wouldn't be able to outrace the alien creatures.

In response, Venerable Drake resonated with his mech again. The Fire Worm regained its energetic glow, but this time it acquired a scarlet tint. The mech calmly holstered the rifle onto its back before extending its two arms.

The two devourers tried to be clever and split up to attack the Fire Worm from both sides. Venerable Drake therefore responded by aiming the muzzles of his mech's flamethrowers in their direction. As soon as the devourers came within effective range, the energy converged into the wrists where the muzzles of the flamethrowers rested.

Then, they spat out fire.

Two humongous gouts of flame extended more than a hundred meters from the flamethrowers. Even an entire corvette would be enveloped by the gigantic scarlet flames!

Once the flamethrowers ceased their operation, the flames died out, leaving nothing but broken creatures in their wake. The snakes slowly drifted down to the core now that their semi-corporeal bodily functions stopped working.

The Fire Worrn massacred the energy life forms with contemptuous ease.

Inside the engineering bay, Chief Petrisc sighed in relief. "It's a good thing those indigenous life forms don't seem all that strong. They can be killed as long as we have the right tools."

With Venerable Drake and his Fire Worm on standby, the Gregarious Wrath wouldn't have to worry about being beset by the strange creatures.

The journey to the center of the Glowing Planet was back on track.

## Chapter 308 Attrition

The sight of an expert pilot in action greatly inspired Ves. Though he'd seen plenty of archival footage and exaggerated drama depictions of expert mechs, seeing one so close and in such detail exhilarated him like nothing else.

Nevertheless, Ves would never have the opportunity to design an expert mech any time soon. The development of each mech relied on restricted technologies with regards to integrating resonating exotics into various components.

For example, at a minimum, the Fire Worm's armor, power reactor, energy cells and internal architecture had received massive enhancements in order to channel so much energy at once. Ves had no clue how to go about designing a mech that could accomplish a fraction of what the Fire Worm exhibited.

In the mech industry, anyone who wanted to design a customized mech for an expert pilot had to be a Journeyman Mech Designer at a minimum. In practice, Senior Mech Designers always took charge over the development of expert mechs. The difficulty of nurturing expert pilots insured they always received some of the best treatment available.

"Did you understand how the Fire Worm is able to hurt those energy creatures?" Ves asked Chief Petrisc.

"Nope. Not a clue."

This left the deep mining expedition in an awkward state. The Gregarious Wrath and her contingent of mechs remained helpless against any further incursions by the same species of aliens. They had only reached the edge of the core and already they faced three of the beasts at once.

What would happen if ten of them came? Or twenty?

The sudden appearance of indigenous life forms forced the Mech Corps to curtail their plans of branching out. With only one mech capable of fighting

back against the worms, the Mech Corps wouldn't be able to send out smaller tunnelers and mining machines on their own.

After a couple of hours of formulating new plans, the captain of the Gregarious Wrath finally ordered the massive beast to continue to borrow towards the center. The Wrath would be taking the lead after all.

Over the next couple of days, the Wrath kept encountering packs of devourers once every few hours. Their threat forced Venerable Drake to remain awake and alert in order to beat them back before they inflicted catastrophic damage on the giant tunneler. Naturally, the rest of the crew also had to stay on their toes.

Even then, the men and women aboard the Gregarious Wrath never slacked off on their duties. They had been through worse, so staying alert for so long hardly fazed them at all. Even Drake could go without sleep for a few days with the help of stimulants.

They made fair progress into the core. This time, a dozen smaller mining machines followed the Wrath in her wake. Anytime their mineral scanners detected a promising signal, they dug the side walls until they dug out traces of Rorach's Bone or some other highly active exotic. With these activities alone, this deep mining expedition had already turned a profit.

Still, the largest piece of Rorach's Bone that the mining machines had uncovered was only as large as a fingertip. That obviously didn't satisfy the System's greedy demands.

As Ves gradually inched closer to his goal, up on the surface, the Glowing Planet had turned into a true battlefield. The amount of mechs that perished at the hands of others had surpassed ten-thousand and began to approach twenty-thousand.

The struggle to occupy the juiciest territories with the richest deposits of high-grade exotics prompted many smaller outfits to fight among themselves.

Groups with greater forces relied on their deterrent factor to discourage most fights before they started, but sometimes greed overtook common sense.

The Mech Corps occupied the most valuable red zone on the Glowing Planet, so they also happened to draw the most powerful of these reckless groups. Highly fanatical pirates under the lead of the Dragons of the Void kept chipping away at the Mech Corps.

This in turn had put a huge burden on the gangs and mercenary corps that settled at the edge of the red zone. As the first line of defense, they often had to take the brunt of the pirate attacks. Attrition had reached an unsustainable level and some outfits even lost eighty percent of their mechs.

At this point in time, the Mech Corps had ceded a third of their territory. The bases painstakingly constructed by the Blood Claws and Walter's Whalers had to be abandoned upon pulling back the defensive lines.

While the Blood Claws only lost around forty percent of their mechs, the Whalers had ceased to become an effective standalone force. Whatever mechs they retained could hardly be relied on to stand in the frontlines as years of lackluster maintenance and shoddy procurement caught up to them. Only a handful of their elites continued to operate under the banners of the much-diminished Blood Claws.

Right now, the Mech Corps fended off the latest thrust of opportunistic pirates. This time, the Dragons of the Void somehow roped in a couple of mercenary outfits to join in their thrust, so the battle became especially frigid as mercs always displayed more competence on the field.

"This is ridiculous! How many mechs have the Dragons thrown away? How is any of this worth it?!" Raella huffed as her mech expertly darted around a mercenary knight. The enemy mech deftly turned to keep her beaten-up Sliverath from stabbing it in the back.

This turned out to be a trap as Fadah's Blackbeak charged in from its rear. The merc detected the approach and panicked. In his attempt to dodge both, a volley of lasers struck the knight in the sword arm, causing its grip to loosen enough for the Blackbeak to bash it out of reach.

Without exchanging any words, Raella moved in and together with Fadah pressured the weaponless knight from both sides. While the merc held off the two-pronged assault with his knight's single shield, it started to accumulate more and more damage whenever he slipped up.

"Now!"

The Sliverath dove forward with two upraised daggers. Before the knight could adjust, the Blackbeak locked its shield with its own, preventing it from maneuvering it elsewhere.

SHUNK!

The daggers stabbed into the knight's back and sank in deep. Even though its boasted decent rear armor, Raella had put her mech's entire momentum into the double blow. The knight lost all power and sank down into a heap.

"These mercs are a tough nut to crack." Raella remarked.

Fadah agreed. "I don't know how much they're getting paid, but this is ridiculous. We dismantled an entire squad and they're still not running away."

The battle still raged on at the center of the gates, which had already been torn down by the concerted efforts of the pirates and mechs. To be honest, the outfits in the employ of the Mech Corps only played a side role in this battle. Their job was to hold the flanks and prevent the pirates from sneaking in the base from another direction.

"Tch. My mech won't hold out for long." Raella cursed as she checked the status readouts of her Sliverath. Constant battle and accumulation of battle

damage had stretched its integrity to its limits. "I think I'll have to bow out soon."

"No problem. I can take care of the rest with Dietrich." Fadah replied with quiet confidence.

Of the two, Fadah had taken down twice as many mechs. Even the Blood Claws acknowledged his skill and considered him the strongest mech pilot after Walter.

In truth, Fadah owed much of his success to the Blackbeak. The highly modified offensive knight had turned into a terror on the battlefield. Even if it had a tendency to build up too much heat in this airless environment, the Blackbeak always bounced back after each round of repairs. Its true worth as a durable mech started to shine through.

The Blackbeak's excellent performance helped stabilize the lines and prevent the pirates from threatening the base from another direction.

Up in space, the Mech Corps long lost any hope of maintaining orbital supremacy. The only upside was that no other force had been able to secure the orbit for themselves as well. So many different factions angled for control over the skies above the Glowing Planet that they'd all gang up on anyone who wanted to monopolize the benefits to themselves.

This led to a rather tense standoff as nobody wanted to provoke a needless fight. Even if they won a single battle, they'd lose so many mechs and ships that they had become worse off than before. Knocking off one single group among hundreds hardly reduced the threat the victor faced.

Ghanso Larkinson gloomily kept his eyes on the plot as his new mech continued to patrol around a small formation of fleet carriers. After he recovered from his first loss, he'd been transferred to another squad and put

into a spare mech, which happened to be a copy of the old baseline Vhedra design.

The Vhedra suited him better than the S variant. His previous narrow escape against a foreign faction's expert pilot hadn't dimmed his enthusiasm for piloting mechs. Instead, it sparked a fire within him, prompting him to become much more focused in his training to be a better mech pilot.

"I won't let your death be in vain, Alex." He whispered to himself as his mech continued its patrol alongside the rest of his squad.

He already distinguished himself by taking down seven mechs since his reassignment. Ever since he broke past his limits and managed to score a hit against the enemy expert mech, Ghanso found that his accuracy against moving targets had improved by leaps and bounds. Even the swiftest light mechs couldn't escape his retribution.

"Larkinson! You're drifting away! Get back in formation!"

"Yes, sir!"

For now, the Mech Corps maintained a sufficient hold onto the red zone, but whether they could get away with the haul they've made so far was still in question.

Nevertheless, Ves cared for none of those concerns, as the Gregarious Wrath finally reached a sufficient depth where they encountered vastly more traces of Rorach's Bone.

In fact, he sensed it before anyone else because strange waves resonated with his sixth sense. Over the past couple of days, Ves realized that some of the secrets of Rorach's Bone had to do with their ability to amplify the resonance of any component. This was actually considered an even more valuable trait than its ability to self-repair.

The importance placed on resonance made Ves suspect that it had something in common with the sixth sense. Even if expert mech pilots didn't gain his sensitivity regarding the sixth sense, they still gained the ability to affect resonating exotics with their mind and will.

"It's an entirely different application of metaphysics."

Besides working on a common set of wavelengths and energy, Ves realized that expert mech pilots applied their enhanced powers in a different fashion. Whereas Ves focused on creating the imaginary and bringing them to life, the mech pilots exerted their influence directly in the material dimensions to accomplish immediate effects.

His presence aboard the Gregarious Wrath enabled him to learn a lot on things he wasn't supposed to learn yet. Apprentice Mech Designers should focus on polishing their foundations.

"I can see why that's prudent. The amount of knowledge needed to work on something as mythical as Rorach's Bone alone is astounding."

Even if Ves had no chance of designing an expert mech on his own, the added knowledge enhanced his understanding of metaphysics. This in turn improved his ability to imbue the X-Factor into a design.

He even came up with a certain guess that his abilities would improve with the help of a resonating exotic.

In any case, the Gregarious Wrath slowed her digging once the researchers determined they had reached their goal. They had dug so deep into the Glowing Planet that they had come across the likely origin point of the Rorach's Bone they had found so far.

They had reached the fabled boneyard.

### Chapter 309 Circumven

This deep inside the Glowing Planet, things started to get weird, especially when they entered the boneyard. The increased density of naturally-formed resonating exotics caused everyone to feel as if they took a dive into a lukewarm bath.

The pressure they felt could solely be felt in their minds. No matter how much they shielded their bodies, they couldn't escape the pervasive thrum of power that radiated off the pieces of Rorach's Bone.

In that regard, the mining machines had a field day excavating all of the trace materials. Picking up a couple of milligrams here and there became as easy as breathing water. However, the Mech Corps ceased to care about these scraps and started to hunger for larger samples of Rorach's Bone.

The larger the piece, the better its potential. A thousand pinches of Rorach's Bone couldn't hold a candle to a single fingertip-sized sample. Most of the mining machines focused on seeking even larger samples of Rorach's Bone.

Eventually, they hadn't managed to find anything notable before trouble came knocking at their door. Everyone aboard the Gregarious Wrath ran to their stations when an alarm rang out. The Wrath's long-ranged sensors detected a massive energy signal approaching their position.

"It's a devourer king!" Chief Petrisc exclaimed as the researchers finished analyzing the readings. "According to the projections, this beast is ten times as large as a regular devourer!"

Ves had been afraid of this. While Venerable Drake easily mopped up the regular devourers, they never faced the true tyrants of the core of the Glowing Planet.

The Gregarious Wrath prepared for a hard fight. Every other mining vehicle swiftly retreated upwards while the Wrath moved so that her mechs had room to fight, not that anyone expected the regular mechs to hurt the devourers.

Through constant battle, the Mech Corps learned that the devourers were attracted to energy sources. In this case, the otherwise useless mechs at least served as bait.

"Ten seconds until the devourer king is in sight!"

The creature finally emerged from the walls of the core. The gigantic snake was at least half as large as the Gregarious Wrath. However, when it opened its endless maw in a challenge, it stretched wide enough to engulf the tunneler in a single gulp.

No one could imagine the extent of the damage should that happen. They had to stop the devourer king in its tracks.

"Are the dimensional smoothers ready to be overloaded?" Chief Petrisc asked an engineer in charge of keeping them safe.

"They're still recovering from the last time we stressed them out. We only have a twenty-eight second allowance this time. Any longer and they'll automatically return to normal levels."

That didn't sound very good. If this devourer king put up a decent fight against their expert pilot, then the Wrath might not escape unscathed this time.

"Do we have any other countermeasures against the energy beings?"

"None..."

Even after many days of experimentation, the Gregarious Wrath remained as helpless before the devourers. Nothing could stop their advance except with the help of the effects stirred by resonating exotics. Out of the thousands of

people in the deep mining expedition, only the Venerable possessed the ability to do so.

The Fire Worm emerged from the rear of the Wrath as flamboyantly as always. The mech's oversized flight systems pushed the aerial striker forward in a direct confrontation with the incoming worm. The mech had already started accumulating energy inside the Wrath.

All of that poured into the rifle held in the Fire Worm's arms. After a short moment where the energies piled up inside the rifle, the weapon spat out three bright lances of lasers.

The beams instantly struck the giant devourer's maw, which strained to absorb the destructive energies.

"The devourer king is hurting!"

"It's not enough." Ves shook his head. He worryingly held Lucky in his arms.

"The maw is the strongest part of a devourer!"

Indeed, the triple laser beams hadn't been able to inflict any notable damage other than giving the devourer some belly aches. After the Fire Worm expended all of the energy it accumulated in the rifle, started to charge its second set of armaments.

As the devourer king slowly inched up the tunnel with its maw opened wide, the Fire Worm released its most destructive blast of firepower. Two massive flares of flame almost engulfed the entire maw. The two flamethrowers continued to project streams of augmented flames until they finally ran out of energy.

"It's still alive!"

Amazingly, the devourer king survived, though it hadn't escaped unscathed this time. The flames had been so intense that it forced the energy being to

shut its maw. This allowed some of the flames to scorch the devourer's semi-corporeal exterior, inflicting severe burn damage to its front.

The devourer king became enraged. Just as Venerable Drake began to charge his mech yet again, the creature did something none of the stupid devourers had done.

The king dove through the tunnel and into the bedrock.

"Damn! This organism grasped our weakness!"

The fact of the matter was that the Fire Worm could only fight inside the tunnel. As much as Venerable Drake would like to, he couldn't turn his mech into a ghost and chase after the devourer king.

This single move had completely negated their only advantage!

On the sensor plot, the signal emitted by the devourer king followed a looping path that brought it straight towards the side of the Gregarious Wrath.

"Overload the dimensional smoothers!"

The Wrath groaned as she pumped an abundance over power into the three devices the Mech Corps borrowed from the MTA. Everyone held their breaths. At least they bought some time for themselves to figure out a solution.

At least that was what they thought.

As the incoming signal came close, the devourer king emerged from the wall and sunk into the hull of the Gregarious Wrath. The creature had withstood the effects of the overloaded dimensional smoothers!

Countless alarms blared out and the status projection highlighted portions of the Wrath in an alarming shade of red.

"We're hit! We've lost telemetry of the middle starboard side of decks eleven to twenty-six!"

The devourer king retreated after it made the attack. The dimensional smoothers still worked to deter the creature, but only after it came near to one of the devices.

"The creature has a much higher tolerance to the dimensional smoothers! We aren't able to cover the entire length of the Wrath with only three devices!"

The devourer king attacked the giant tunneling machine twice, each time taking a bite out of the affected sections. Everything in its sphere of influence that ran on power turned into useless scrap, while every man or woman turned into braindead idiots as if they had their lives sapped out of them. Despite the lack of physical damage, the energy being had virtually annihilated a large swathe of the Wrath.

"Where is the Fire Worm?"

"He just reentered the Wrath, but he won't be able to tell where to go!"

The devourer king cunningly swirled around the Gregarious Wrath after each attack. This prevented it from being pinned down and minimized its chances of meeting the Fire Worm.

Ves felt his heart begin to thud like a drum. The Mech Corps truly possessed no other means to fight against this deadly creature. He thought they might have hidden away a trump card or two, but it turned out they didn't have any other means to fight against an energy being. They were just so rare in the galaxy and had never shown up in the Komodo Star Sector before.

He began to think of an exit strategy. Ves had no faith that the Fire Worm could take down the king before it could engulf the entire Wrath. He quietly stepped back from Chief Petrisc's side and eyed the exit hatch.

"The dimensional smoothers activated their safeguards! We can't overload them anymore!"

That was very bad news. The Gregarious Wrath's only form of deterrence against the devourer king lost much of its effectiveness. The devourer king evidently sensed this change. It ceased to attack an unimportant corner of the Wrath and dove straight for the power reactors in the rear engineering bay.

"It's coming straight for us!"

The devourer king easily endured the weaker dimensional stabilization field emitted by the smoother and dove deeper into the Wrath. Hundreds of crewmen lost their lives as the monstrous creature passed through their bodies. The Wrath herself ceased to move as she sustained too much damage.

Ves didn't have the opportunity to run. Everything happened so quickly that he could barely take a few steps away from the main control panel. Just a second later, a part of the transparent form of the devourer king emerged from the roof of the engineering bay.

A few armed crewmen shot their weapons at the approaching maw of doom but accomplished nothing at all. Others screamed, panicked or cried. Chief Petrisc faced his approaching his impending death with an impassive face.

Just when all seemed certain, Lucky jumped out of Ves' grasp. The cat turned into a silver streak that bumped straight into the blackish map of the devourer. Upon reaching it, Lucky activated a supercharged version of his energy claws and tore a small hole out of the abyss.

Somehow, this minor action stopped the massive energy creature. Lucky fell back down in an exhausted state.

"Lucky!" Ves called and ran after his cat who collapsed on the deck. "Are you okay?!"

"Meow..."

Lucky appeared much dimmer than before. He even lost some of his silver luster. Yet his single act of defiance had saved them all from imminent death. The devourer king sustained so much damage that it had been pushed back a couple of decks. Still, the wound only hurt it slightly. The monster hadn't sustained any actual damage.

However, before it could make another attempt at devouring the power reactors, the Fire Worm finally reached the right compartment to attack the devourer. It instantly fired off its laser rifle against the devourer's side.

This time, the lasers hit home on the creature. The lasers burned aside the monster's thick exterior and dealt severe internal damage. The devourer became so hurt that it started to rear back from the Wrath, but Venerable Drake didn't let go of his prey.

Without thinking of the consequences, the Fire Worm fired off a single enhanced flame strike. It burned the entire deck into crisp and cremated all of the bodies that had died from being passed through by the devourer.

The flames bore through the gap burned by the laser and inflicted an even greater level of internal damage. The flames burned so hot that the surrounding compartments melted apart.

The devourer king finally couldn't take it anymore. The creature burned from inside out and finally let out a final inaudible roar before it ceased to move.

Moments after that, its ethereal form fragmented into pieces and drifted out of the tunnel. The devourer king had been slain.

No one celebrated the victory this time. The Wrath suffered grievous damage to the point of crippling her in place. Getting her back in a barely functional state required a lot of emergency repairs. With their time on the Glowing Planet running out, the Mech Corps had to race against all odds to retrieve the Gregarious Wrath.

In the meantime, Ves hugged Lucky tight against his chest. "I don't know what you just did, but I'll be sure to pay you back what you lost! I'll get the Mech Corps to feed you some Rorach's Bone if I have to!"

"Meow!" Lucky already perked up when he heard those words. The gem cat already started to salivate at the thought of munching on some of those extremely delicious exotics.

Ves had no doubt the Mech Corps would acquiesce on this issue. After all, everyone in the engineering bay witnessed Lucky's feat. Without his timely assistance, the Gregarious Wrath would have truly become stranded deep inside the Glowing Planet. As long as the engineering bay remained intact, the Wrath could still regain her mobility.

Chief Petrisc approached Ves with a touch of awe. "When I saw you being followed by a mechanical cat, I didn't think it hid such capabilities."

"What can I say? He's a marvel of Rubarthan engineering." Ves lightly boasted. He wanted to intimate that his pet came from a first-rate superstate. Only they could turn a mechanical pet into a killing machine that was capable of harming energy beings. "I hope the Mech Corps doesn't have any intentions for my pet."

"Don't worry! I'm sure command can keep their greedy hands off your property. We aren't that desperate to steal your cat. Besides, we won't be able to beat its loyalty programming anyway."

That lifted off a weight off Ves.

### Chapter 310 Vault

The devourer king suffered the same fate as its lesser brothers, but the price hadn't been worth it. The creature managed to wound the Gregarious Wrath severely. Over twenty percent of her systems and crew had been lost,

stranding the giant tunneling machine near the inner core of the Glowing Planet.

Who knew if more devourer kings rested deeper inside. What if an even larger devourer emperor rested in the exact center? The Gregarious Wrath couldn't take on another devourer king even if she wanted to, so the entire deep mining expedition stopped advancing deeper.

While the smaller tunneling and mining machines started excavating the Rorach's Bone buried in the vicinity, everyone aboard the Wrath began to help with the repairs.

They only had a few days to get the Wrath functional again. The end of the seventy-day period loomed closer and the Mech Corps started to plan for a comprehensive evacuation. The Wrath needed at least a couple more days to climb back up to the surface.

Meanwhile Ves or rather Lucky became the star of the show. No one expected the small and cute mechanical pet that always hung around Ves to hide such potent capabilities. Even Ves himself didn't know that Lucky could harm energy beings!

"Lucky!" Ves held his dim cat in front of his face. "Why didn't you help me fend off my mother? You could have chased her away at the very least!"

"Meow."

Ever since he repelled the huge devourer king, Lucky turned almost lifeless, as if he expended all of the energy he accumulated ever since he stepped on the Glowing Planet.

"Next time my mother comes, don't sit around like a helpless kitten. Just swipe her face with your claws!"

"Meow..."

Ves sighed. He couldn't stay angry at his cat, especially since he saved his life yet again. Right now, he wanted to make sure that Lucky got rewarded for his services.

The entire crew aboard the Gregarious Wrath looked at Lucky with a new light. Some wanted to pick him up and hug him, while others gripped their holstered pistols tighter. Pretty much everyone took for granted that Lucky was an extravagant bodyguard pet from a first-rate superstate. Many people envied Ves for owning such an exclusive gift.

"We've almost reached the vault." Chief Petrisc told Ves as their lifter platform almost reached the center of the Wrath. "Now, don't misunderstand. You aren't there to take anything away. You're only tasked with inspecting the security systems for any damage accrued from the last attack. Return as soon as you've run over the systems."

"Understood."

"One more thing. The devourer king's attack has wiped out a lot of archival data, including the logs pertaining to the vault. Please take stock of the inventory while you are there. Of course, you're not allowed to take anything away. We will conduct a strict search when you enter and exit the vault, so don't think you can sneak anything past our guards."

"No problem, chief. I'll make sure not a hair is out of place."

They reached the highly-fortified vault doors. Two mechs stood at the sides, one of which pointed its laser rifle at Ves.

"Don't be alarmed, Ves. Any guest we bring to the vault receives the same treatment."

Though it unnerved Ves to be pointed at by a mech-sized weapon, he could tell that the rifle's safeties hadn't been disengaged. He nodded to show his

understanding and let the chief bring him up to the checkpoint where a squad of exoskeleton-suited guards awaited their arrival.

After Ves and Lucky underwent a thorough search, the vault doors slowly retracted, revealing a clean metallic chamber filled with small, head-sized storage compartments.

"There are over ten-thousand different safes inside this vault, of which more than a third are filled with samples of Rorach's Bone or something else of extreme value. Due to the recent attack, we aren't quite sure how much are left. What if the devourer king ate them all? Here's a pass to open the safes. It will only work for the next four hours, so you better move quickly."

Once Ves received the pass that enabled him to open the safes, he entered the vault with Lucky, upon which the doors slowly closed again.

He was finally left alone. "Okay buddy, this is your Lucky day."

The first thing he did was to disable the sensors and monitoring systems. Ordinarily, such an act couldn't be done by himself, but the crew of the ship had already disabled various systems related to the vault's security throughout the Wrath. Ves only had to expose some control panels and unplug some wires he memorized beforehand.

Every monitoring and security system inside the vault turned off. Ves grinned once he confirmed that nothing stood in his way from robbing, ahem, inspecting the vault.

"Alright Lucky, let's take stock of the inventory and see how much the devourer king swallowed its contents."

"Meow!"

Ves approached a random row of safes and swiped his pass over one of them. The safe box opened up to reveal a floating, eyeball-sized exotic

mineral of unknown properties. It wasn't Rorach's Bone, but it must be valuable if the Mech Corps stored it inside the vault.

After a few seconds of consideration, Ves drew his card and swiped it in front of the safe before flipping it over his shoulder. The antigrav modules holding the ore aloft in the center of the safe pushed the ore out of the safe, upon which Lucky jumped up and caught it between his paws.

While Lucky enthusiastically devoured the highly valuable exotic like he'd been starved for months, Ves swiped his card downwards, prompting the emptied safe to lock itself up.

"Alright, this safe is empty. Let me note that in my log. Done. Let's move on to the next one."

Ves casually walked down the rows, opening up each and every safe to see whether they held anything of value. Sometimes the safes contained nothing, but most often they contained small amounts of Rorach's Bone. The Mech Corps must have stored every piece of Rorach's Bone larger than a pinch inside these safes.

Right now, all of it happened to be within his grasp.

Chief Petrisc hadn't given Ves the opportunity to 'inspect' the vault out of a whim. In truth, high command had been dragging their feet with regards to allowing Ves to take his fair share.

He even heard rumors that some in command wanted to keep the largest pieces to themselves. After all, a hand-sized piece of Rorach's Bone was the *creme de la creme*.

Their refusals reminded Ves that the people who ran the Mech Corps prioritized their own benefits over anyone else's. A small figure like Ves didn't register on their radar.

Perhaps out of guilt or out of a sense of obligation, the captain turned a blind eye to those directives. Instead, he allowed Chief Petrisc to come up with this convoluted scheme to allow Ves to take what he wanted from the vault.

Even though a couple of people knew about the scheme, they all owed their lives to Lucky. Besides showing their gratitude, they also allowed Lucky to munch on the exotics because they needed him to regain his strength.

What if another devourer king came? What if Venerable Drake couldn't stop it from submerging into the bedrock again? The Wrath had become even more of a sitting duck to the crippling damage she sustained in the last attack. They couldn't even overload the dimensional smoothers anymore, as additional safeties had set that restricted any further rough treatment.

Thus, Lucky became their only hope of buying enough time for Venerable Drake to come to their rescue. Not that high command agreed. They simply didn't believe that Lucky alone repelled a gigantic devourer worm half the size of the Gregarious Wrath.

In any case, Ves didn't take their refusal to heart, because he would have received a couple of scraps for a reward. "It's good to be king for a day."

As he passed through the vaults, Ves threw out anything that looked promising as long as Lucky finished processing his earlier meals.

As soon as Lucky figured out this pattern, he ceased to chew the minerals for enjoyment and began to focus on breaking them down as fast as possible. His energy claws along with his incredibly strong and sharp teeth ensured he never needed to spend more than a minute to break down a chunk.

The cat kept inhaling the pieces as long as they fit his gullet. Evidently, Lucky didn't have to worry too much about his digestion. As soon as the ores ended up in his stomach, they ceased to be a concern.

After feeding Lucky with more than a dozen chunks of Rorach's Bone and other curiosities, Lucky regained his usual vigor. His eyes sparkled like gemstones and his silvery exterior took on a shiny sheen. The gaps between his exterior plating glowed so brightly that it resembled plasma.

"Keep eating, Lucky. This is a once-in-a-decade opportunity for you. I'd have to sell countless mechs to afford this much Rorach's Bone."

In actuality, exotics of these grades couldn't be found in the open market, especially in the resource-deprived galactic rim.

Ves sighed at the thought of all of the riches the Glowing Planet still held. The Mech Corps only retrieved a fraction of its bountiful wealth. The rest would be handed over to the Hegemony and the Coalition once the seventy-day deadline had passed.

"Even with such a generous window of time, they'll still end up with more than ninety-nine percent of the wealth."

It sounded so unfair, but that was the privilege of power. The second-rate states only had to wave a single hand to wipe out the Bright Republic.

"C'mon Lucky, eat faster!"

Lucky underwent a subtle as Ves kept feeding him with medium-grade Rorach's Bone. His entire surface rippled as if his metallic body became pliable. Ves had the sense that Lucky didn't just convert the Rorach's Bone to pure energy.

His gem cat somehow incorporated their properties to his body.

Ves became happier when he realized that Lucky grew stronger. He especially looked forward to seeing the self-repair properties of Rorach's Bone in action.

"Keep eating. The stronger you are, the better you'll be able to protect me."

When they reached halfway, Ves tossed about five percent of the contents of the safes to Lucky. He didn't dare grab a larger share and prompt the Mech Corps to launch an investigation.

A five percent loss should be unremarkable enough for some doddering bureaucrat to dismiss the report as a natural consequence from being attacked by a giant semi-corporeal snake.

Once Ves swiped his card for the umpteenth time, a safe opened up to reveal the largest piece of Rorach's Bone to date.

It was about half as large as his head.

"They did find a piece!"

The Mech Corps never intimated to Ves that they dug up a piece of high-grade Rorach's Bone. The chunk floating in front of him was the most priceless piece of exotic he had ever come across since he arrived at the Glowing Planet.

Ves turned his head to peek at Lucky. His cat eyed the high-grade Rorach's Bone with sparkling, hungry eyes.

"This is mine!" He told his cat, and quickly opened up an adjacent safe and threw a smaller piece of Rorach's Bone to Lucky.

Even if Lucky hungered for the large ball of bone, he still couldn't resist a meal that landed right in front of him. Sometimes he could be simple-minded in this way. Ves let out a deep breath once he saw he successfully diverted Lucky's attention.

With heated eyes, Ves retrieved a pair of special gloves from his suit pocket and put them over his hands. He then reached out to grab for the ore. After months of work and avoiding almost-certain death, he finally reached the end of his mission.

As his hands almost reached the ore, a third hand reached out and pulled the ore out of his reach.