

## Chapter 311 Mistaken

"What the?"

Ves turned to face the one thing he never wanted to meet again. His mother's ghost. "You!"

"Hello, my son." His mother smiled at him as she held the high-grade ore.

"You have been a naughty boy. This does not belong to you."

"Damn ghost!" Ves cursed and turned to Lucky. "C'mon buddy, the ghost is here! Attack!"

He expected his pet to pounce on the ghost and scratch out her face just like he scratched the devourer king's maw.

He did not expect Lucky to ignore him outright and keep on munching at his latest dish.

"Lucky!"

His mother's smile took on a knowing edge. "Have you forgotten where you obtained him in the first place?"

The System gifted Lucky to Ves shortly after he received it. The System came from his father, which meant...

His mother snapped her fingers. "Come here."

Lucky suddenly ceased his munching and slinked over to his mother, bypassing Ves as if he didn't exist. As soon as he reached her legs, he brushed his body against them as if his mother was his owner.

Ves felt betrayed.

"So my son has named you Lucky, has he? That is a fine name for a creature such as you." His mother remarked as she bent down to pet his back. "I see he has been treating you well."

He already felt a tug from his recently recovered internal energy cycle. His mother didn't hold back from harming her own son.

"You're not my mother!" He hissed. "Stop pretending you're her!"

His words fell on deaf ears. Lucky kept acting cute in his mother's presence while the witch herself looked at Ves like he turned into a three-year old kid who was having a tantrum.

"Ves, I am not your enemy. I am your mother. I can never hurt my own flesh and blood."

"Then what about your presence and your life-sucking aura?! You're draining me even as we speak!" He replied and backed away. He even tried to retrieve his laser pistol, only to remember he handed over the weapon to the guards just outside the vault.

The extra distance helped, but Ves quickly bumped into a wall of safes. He had nowhere else to go as his mother drifted forward as if she didn't have a care in the world.

The drain quickly picked up, and Ves started to lose a significant amount of internal energy. Even though he had no clue of its use, he didn't wish to give it all away to an indigenous monster from the Glowing Planet.

Sadly, his only means of fending her off had just rolled over to show his belly to her. His mother reached down to scratch Lucky's chin. Who was his real owner here?!

"Oh Ves, poor Ves, you understand so little." His mother tutted as she hovered closer. "You keep lying to yourself, but you can't deny what your heart is telling you. It is time for you to grow up."

Even as she spoke those words, the drain accelerated to the point where Ves lost control over his body. This encounter happened in the exact same manner as the last two times. He really grew sick of facing energy beings!

His mother must have been aware of how Ves started to grow feeble. "My time grows short. Just know that I am glad to see you healthy, and wish you don't risk your life anymore. I have lost many friends and family in the last war. Not even mech designers are safe."

"Go away..."

"I will see you again, Ves." She whispered, and her body started to fade out of existence.

The only problem was that she took the high-grade ore with her. Somehow, the Rorach's Bone broke apart under her grip and swirled around his mother's increasingly translucent body. Her ghost-like form radiated like liquid silver and for a moment, Ves thought she had turned fully corporeal.

Then, she faded away, leaving nothing of her trace behind.

Ves collapsed onto the deck. He breathed deeply as he tried to cope with the increasingly familiar sense of weakness. The ghost had leached from him again, and this time she stole his mission reward as well!

"Damn her!" Ves vented and banged his fist against the deck.

Lucky obliviously climbed up to his feet and padded over to Ves. He curiously bumped his forepaw against Ves.

"What a great help you've been."

"Meow." Lucky made a gesture that indicated he wanted to feed again.

"Really now. Do you think I'm in the mood to feed you when you've just turned your back on me?"

"Meow!"

Ves tried to ignore his pet, but couldn't. Lucky had a way of worming into his heart. Despite his sudden betrayal, he didn't fault his cat. He must have been programmed to recognize his mother. His friend-and-foe identification must have grown confused, and like the simple-minded machine that he was, Lucky prioritized his mother over her son.

The entire encounter revealed a lot about Lucky. As much as Ves had grown to love his feline companion, he had no clue how he worked and what kind of programming dictated his behavior.

He supposed he should be growing paranoid about Lucky. After all, his cat did betray him just then. Yet Ves had truly become attached to Lucky and considered him a part of his family. He really didn't want to part with his pet.

"Oh alright. You can stay with me, but you better not defect again next time!"

Ves still had a lot of safes to go through before his pass expired. He wanted to make the most out of the opportunities he obtained and didn't let his mother's impromptu visit ruin his plans.

Most eagerly, Ves wanted to go through the remaining safes quickly and find another high-grade Rorach's Bone. His mother already snatched the only specimen he found so far. He dearly hoped the Mech Corps stored another similarly-sized sample in this vault.

"Not here. Nope. Too small. Nothing here. Heavens, nothing again!"

Even as he rapidly opened up the safes, he found nothing that could match the splendor of the high-grade Rorach's Bone. He only came across medium-grade bones or unknown curiosities that held little significance to his mission. He chucked some of them out to Lucky and continued to check the other safes.

By the end of the eight-hour period, his pass dissolved into air. Ves raced to open every safe within the time limit, but his efforts failed to yield what he desired most. The vault only held one high-grade Rorach's Bone and his mother had taken it away!

"Stupid ghost!"

After cursing out the thieving ghost for a minute, Ves finally gave up. In low spirits, he began to finish his cursory inspection of the vault before he knocked the armored door. It slowly retracted, allowing Ves and Lucky to depart the vault.

"Did you have a good haul, sir?" A security officer asked as he searched through his pockets.

"Oh. Yeah. A good haul."

"Your pet looks a lot healthier now."

Lucky acted like he never did anything wrong. His newly invigorated state even brought back his playfulness. He chased around and pestered the security guards like any other regular cat.

Once the inspection ended, Ves headed straight back towards his bunk, though he also made a stop at the mess hall to retrieve a nutrient bar. He needed to regain some energy fast, so he didn't care for the nutrient bar's awful taste.

As he laid down on his bunk, Ves considered his next option. He couldn't return empty-handed. The System's penalty was too severe for him to bear.

"The crew of the Gregarious Wrath will think I've already fed the high-grade ore to Lucky. I won't be able to ask for another one, not when it holds so much value."

He couldn't just walk up to Chief Petrisc and say he slipped up and let a ghost that pretended to be his long-dead mother snatch the high-grade ore from the vault. It would be like saying his dog ate his data chips that held his homework.

"What can I do?"

The time to depart the Glowing Planet had almost come. Ves only had days left to figure something out. "It's unlikely Lucky and I can earn more merits. The Wrath is stuck in place, and none of the tunneling machines have the guts to burrow deeper where the likelihood of finding high-grade ores is higher."

Ves found it extraordinarily frustrating to fail at the cusp of completing his mission. He let down his guard and forgot that his mother had always appeared out of nowhere.

"Though, why take the ore? Why hasn't she dug it up herself?"

It might have had something to do with the devourers. A small human-sized ghost probably couldn't match the prowess of the devourers which monopolized the core of the Glowing Planet.

Only after the deep mining expedition killed off one of their alphas did his mother finally appear.

"It's good to know that even she can be afraid of something."

Ves didn't even realize he referred to the ghost as his mother without challenge. It was as if it was the most natural thing in the universe to say.

He guessed that the devourer king must have claimed this territory as its own. Now that it had died, the entire area became ownerless. For a short period of time, there shouldn't be any risks of encountering another devourer.

A bold idea popped into his mind. "Why not go out on my own?"

The Mech Corps had become incredibly timid, but that didn't mean that Ves had to hide on the Wrath. If he couldn't beg them for another high-grade ore, he might as well venture out into the tunnels and conduct his own search.

He turned his gaze back to Lucky, who started to slumber atop his chest. He ate an enormous amount of minerals recently. Even though he didn't gain any weight, his cat still had to digest all of his gains.

"Rest well, Lucky. I'll be relying on your senses tomorrow to find some juicy pieces of Rorach's Bone."

The next day, Ves fleshed out his plan and approached Chief Petrisc with his intentions. The Chief Engineer frowned at Ves.

"Now why would you want to go out by yourself? Don't you know how dangerous it is?!"

"But can you lend me a shuttle?"

"Oh, that's not a problem. We have plenty of those to spare. The bigger issue is that there's no way you can stay in range of a dimensional smoother. All the other machines are carrying smaller versions of the devices, but it still won't fit inside a shuttle. Furthermore, there's no chance I can get permission to borrow one for you to use. In short, you'll have to go out naked and exposed!"

Ves hadn't thought of that. The space around the Glowing Planet was fairly unstable. Random wrinkles in spacetime had claimed the lives of thousands of oblivious visitors, including the entire trading convoy that initially stumbled upon the Glowing Planet.

Going out without a dimensional smoother was highly dangerous!

After some deep consideration, Ves weighed the risks. If he stayed in proximity to the Gregarious Wrath, he should still fall somewhat in her protective envelope. Even if the stabilization field emitted by the dimensional

smoothers weakened quite a bit the further he drifted away from the Wrath, he should still receive some benefits.

He made a calculated risk by pressing on with his choice. "Just lend me a shuttle, chief. I know what I'm dealing with but I don't have any choice."

It took a lot of begging to convince Petrisc to release a shuttle for his use. Despite the chief's reluctance, Ves had annoying him so much that he relented, if only to chase away an annoying fly.

"Thanks, chief! I'll only be out for a couple of hours at a time."

"Don't come crawling back to me if you suffer a mishap!"

### **Chapter 312 Prospecting**

The chief engineer arranged a souped-up armored shuttle for Ves. Compared to a regular shuttle, it held a lot less storage space, but the armor and increased structural integrity made up for it in spades.

The first time Ves stepped inside the shuttle with Lucky hanging over his shoulders, he became a little bit intimidated by its complex control scheme.

Forces employed armored shuttles in many different ways, from stealthily dropping commandos behind enemy lines to pursuing a rampaging mech. The Mech Corps employed even more advanced shuttles that came with many additional features that bore unwieldy acronyms like GURED or NEFFI-Fast.

"Don't worry." A shuttle technician said as he accompanied Ves inside. "Let me activate the dummy mode for you. It'll disable most of the advanced features and automate the rest. As far as the controls go, it'll turn into something similar to the games you can play from your comm."

"Ah, thank you for the trouble. Please do so."

Ves sat down the chair and watched the technician navigate the projected control panel. Overall, the menus looked similar to those employed by mechs,



so Ves quickly got the hang of it himself. Still, as he hadn't trained in piloting shuttles at all, it was best to leave the controls to dummy mode.

In the wide-ranging galaxy, humanity became increasingly dependent on machines to rule their lives. Humanity was a quintessential tool-using race that had ascended into dominance due to their ever-voracious appetite for deadlier and more capable machines.

Naturally, this also presented problems as many machines required extreme amounts of training to master their use. Mechs alone not only demanded potentates with the right genetic aptitude, they also required at least ten years of training to gain the most basic qualification to pilot them these days.

At the start of the Age of Mechs, mech pilots only needed four years to effectively wield their mechs. This stark difference showcased the relentless advance to developing better but more complex machines, which meant it applied to anything that fell under this category, including mechs, shuttles and starships.

A human could only master a couple of skills in a given amount of time. To provide against contingencies and to make their products more appealing, developers and manufacturers of these machines standardized the implementation of dummy modes to their products.

The basic standard of an effective dummy mode would be that even a ten-year old kid could figure out the basic controls. The moment the dummy mode began to proliferate, life became much easier. Even though most of the advanced capabilities would be wasted, sometimes a person only needed to accomplish a simple job, like going from A to B.

Ves fell into the same situation. He had no intentions of performing any advanced maneuvers. He just wanted to go out into the tunnel and sniff out a high-grade Rorach's Bone.

"C'mon Lucky, you better get your mineral senses ready. I'll be relying on you to get me another fat piece of bone." Ves petted the lazy cat on his shoulder.

Using the dummy mode, Ves easily drifted his armored shuttle out of the hangar, to the collective relief of the crew. At least he didn't veer off and crash against the deck or something.

"It really is like a game."

Through making some delicate hand gestures, Ves got the hang of the controls. He maintained a slow speed and slowly inched the shuttle away from the Gregarious Wrath. The tunneler loomed large in the shuttle's augmented sensors.

Currently, tons of shuttles and mech technicians crawled over her exterior. Ves knew that even more repair crews worked inside the tunneler. To get the Wrath moving again required all hands on deck.

"I should be there too."

Someone like Ves might not understand any of the larger systems, but he could still lend a hand with routine repairs. Still, acquiring another high-grade Rorach's Bone ranked much higher than earning a bit more kudos from the crew.

"Now then, let's start my search."

Due to the high amount of interference and other weird effects, the Mech Corps possessed very few means of locating high-grade Rorach's Bone. They could only vaguely detect that they had entered a more promising area. Even if a valuable piece of ore rested a meter away from the tunnel wall, the sensors couldn't detect its presence.

This prompted the mining vehicles around the Wrath to go blind and hope they picked the right direction. The odds of Ves encountering a high-grade specimen in a couple of days was extremely rare.

Fortunately, he wasn't alone. He still had Lucky, who's insatiable appetite for quality exotics always drew him to the most promising deposits. His senses was a lot more keener than the mineral scanners aboard the Gregarious Wrath.

"Alright Lucky, point me to the right direction."

"Meow."

"Don't meow at me like you don't understand what I've said. Go on. Find something!"

It took a bit of coaxing to get Lucky to point at a promising direction. Ves carefully flew his shuttle further away from the Wrath and towards an unremarkable tunnel wall section.

"Is this the place you detected something promising?"

"Meow!"

"Alright, let's head out."

Ves exited the pilot's chair and moved to the main compartment where a bulky mining suit awaited him. The suit was twice as thick as a hazard suit and required powered assistance to move, which technically turned it into an exoskeleton. This variant came with a couple of optimizations that made it suitable to roam close to the center of the Glowing Planet.

As Ves drifted out from the hatch, his suit's antigrav modules came online, which held the entire thing aloft. Meanwhile, Lucky had climbed on top of his helmet and kept a firm grip.

Small thrusters on the backpack module of the suit flared to life. The force propelled him forward and he reached the wall in no time. In fact, he almost crashed against it if he hadn't managed to figure out how to turn around and thrust in the opposite direction.

"I should learn how to maneuver in zero-G sometime."

Spaceborn humans learned how to move in zero gravity conditions as soon as they learned how to walk. A landbound human like Ves would never be able to catch up to their level of skill, but acquiring the basics shouldn't be too difficult.

Once Ves stabilized his position, he experimentally knocked on the smooth and compacted tunnel wall. The first meters should be extremely tough to dig through, and no man-sized mining machine could put a dent in it. Ves didn't even bother to bring any tools for that reason.

He didn't need to when he already had a cat that could do the work in his stead.

"Alright Lucky, go ahead and dig." He transmitted over the channel he maintained with his pet. His gauntlets grabbed Lucky's body and held it out against the wall. "C'mon, use your magic."

Lucky seemed put off at being treated like a slave, but he eventually began to dig a small tunnel for himself. Somehow, Lucky parted the solid compacted materials as easily as digging through sand. He didn't even have to resort to his energy claws to dig deeper.

Twenty minutes went by as Lucky dug an eight meter tunnel. He stopped once the tunnel began to glow. His senses hadn't deceived him. The cat managed to find an energetic piece of ore!

"Don't eat it yet! Bring it back to me first!"

It took quite a bit of effort for Lucky to dislodge the ore and bring it back to the lip of the tunnel he dug out. It turned out to be a quail-egg sized exotic that he'd seen before in the vault.

"This isn't Rorach's Bone. Lucky, you found the wrong mineral. I want Rorach's Bone, not this junk."

Even though Ves was certain the piece held a lot of value, he threw it back to Lucky, who eagerly munched it down. Ves did not have any delusions that he would be able to sneak an extremely valuable hoard of exotics past the Mech Corps. A big find would also cast more suspicion on Ves.

For the next twelve hours, Ves kept moving his shuttle from place to place, taking care not to stray too far from the Wrath. At this distance, Ves figured he didn't run any risk of encountering a dangerous spacetime anomaly.

Sadly, his conservative efforts amounted to nothing. Each time Lucky dug something up, it turned out to be a medium-grade Rorach's Bone or worse. Even Lucky's vaunted mineral senses couldn't pinpoint any pieces of high-grade ores.

"This isn't getting me anywhere." He sighed as he returned the armored shuttle back to the hangar. "This session is a bust."

There was nothing wrong with his methods, but trying to find a piece of high-grade ore revolved around luck. If he had as much manpower as the Mech Corps, he'd be bound to stumble upon it sooner or later.

The next day, Ves ventured out into the same armored shuttle and ventured further away from the Gregarious Wrath. While this exposed him to greater risk, he figured that moving away from the Wrath should allow Lucky to be more accurate in his search.

Nothing changed from yesterday. Lucky kept finding decent traces of low to medium-grade exotics, but they didn't fulfill the criteria set out by Ves. Halfway throughout the session, Ves groaned and palmed his helmet with his gauntlet.

"Do I need to move even further away?"

He already extended his range further down where the concentration of Rorach's Bone steadily increased. The deeper he went, the higher the chance of locating a high-grade specimen, though he also had to brave the risk of suffering a spacetime mishap.

After some serious consideration, he hardened his eyes. "Fortune and danger go hand-in-hand. I can't afford to play it safe."

Despite the risks, Ves resolutely pushed his shuttle a little deeper into the tunnel. The shuttle stopped three kilometers away from the Wrath.

With Lucky acting like a hunting dog, the two continued to prospect for minerals. The extra distance yielded significantly larger samples of Rorach's Bone, but they still fell within the medium-grade category.

Hungry for something better, Ves slowly inched his shuttler further and further away from the Gregarious Wrath. Somehow, he could feel the increasing instability in the local space. The omnipresent fields emitted by the dimensional smoothers had weakened enormously by now.

Further down the tunnel, Ves even saw flashes that disrupted the tunnel walls. The danger was very real at this point. He even thought about pulling back sometimes.

"I can't give up. Not when I'm this close."

Lucky had grown a lot more enthusiastic by now. He continued to stuff himself endlessly with the minerals he dug up. His stomach had literally turned into a bottomless hole as he kept eating Rorach's Bone after Rorach's Bone. Even

his exterior plating began to take a milky-white sheen from its former silvery luster.

The change indicated that Lucky had definitely incorporated Rorach's Bone on a deeper level.

Ves was happy to see his pet grow stronger, but he still hadn't found what he was looking for. At the end of his second jaunt, Ves was just about to return to the Wrath when Lucky suddenly struck paydirt.

His cat's activity level spiked. Lucky had to expand the tunnel he dug in order to retrieve a large piece of glowing white ore.

"High-grade Rorach Bone!"

Lucky had done it! Ves laughed and brought his cat to his helmet and nuzzled him. The cat kept turning his head back to the piece of high-grade ore.

Despite his obedience to Ves, Lucky kept mooning over the priceless piece of Rorach's Bone.

"I'm sorry, Lucky, but I need it more than you."

Once he put down Lucky on his shoulder, Ves looked around to see no one nearby. He activated his Privacy Shield to disable the shuttle from recording him on its sensors before he held out one of his gauntlets, which interfaced with his comm.

Ves activated the System and went to the Missions page. He held out the ball of high-grade Rorach's Bone and presented it to his comm. "Here you go, System."

Nothing happened.

Uh, hello? This is prime quality Rorach's Bone! Why aren't you accepting it yet?!"

[The material that you present does not fulfill the criteria of the mission.  
Please present the correct substance to pass the mission.]

"What?!"

### Chapter 313 Boneyard

Ves wanted to bang his head against the tunnel wall. All this time, he assumed that the System desired a piece of high-grade Rorach's Bone. To think he made a big mistake frustrated him to no end. He quickly re-read the mission.

[Mission]

Mission: Obtaining the Core

Difficulty: B-Rank

Prerequisites: Find your way to the Glowing Planet

Description

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

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

Reward:

Special Upgrade Voucher (Machine), 10 golden lottery tickets

The System hadn't named the material by name!

"What are you looking for, System! Just tell me, damnit!"



Naturally, the soft-spoken System almost never replied to his request. It was as if it thought that Ves should figure out stuff on his own. The System never coddled him in any way.

"So it's not Rorach's Bone you're looking for, right?"

Ves didn't know much about Rorach's Bone, but acquiring a better sample than what he held right now shouldn't be possible. This was the best that he could get.

The stupidly obtuse System refused to reveal what kind of substance it demanded. Whatever it was, it should be even rarer than high-grade Rorach's Bone. Perhaps it couldn't even be found at this depth.

Whatever the case, the answer lay deeper into the core.

He stood at a crossroads now. Either he could summon up his courage and brave the dangers, or he could stay at his current depth and hope he struck it rich.

"There's only a day or two left before we have to leave this place."

From what he heard, the repairs for the Gregarious Wrath went well. Replacing the most essential broken components was a straightforward though labor-intensive procedure. Relatively little challenges had popped up that could otherwise delay the repairs.

This meant that Ves had two more days to find what the System sought.

"I really hate you sometimes, you know that?"

Ves had little choice but to bow before the inevitable. He decided to return the shuttle back to the Wrath and plan out his miniature expedition properly.

First, he stocked up his shuttle with additional supplies, including food and water. Returning to the Wrath to eat and sleep took too much time. Ves planned to make the best of the time that remained.

Second, he checked the System whether he could buy anything useful. Even though his DP skyrocketed lately, he still couldn't afford anything useful. He'd have to accumulate millions of DP to acquire a rudimentary device that could protect him from spacetime fluctuations.

"It's not for nothing that the Mech Corps is willing to pay out of their nose to borrow the dimensional smoothers."

Looking at how much DP he earned in recent weeks made Ves suspicious. He knew how many mechs the LMC could produce at a given amount of time. It only possessed one proper production line that could fabricate the Blackbeak.

As for the third-party manufacturer, the EME only possessed four modern production lines. Producing fifty mechs a month shouldn't be too much of a problem for them, but the amount of DP that Ves had earned suggested to him that he sold a lot more Blackbeaks than that.

Then he figured it out. It should be the virtual Blackbeaks that must have set off the current surge of DP. As a modern 5-star virtual mech, it sold in much less numbers than in the lower tiers. Mech designers who competed at this level paid a lot more attention to performance, and his mech didn't specialize in short bursts of combat that characterized arena combat.

"Looks like interest in the Blackbeak is surging."

Ves could only attribute the increased interest to the successful performance of the Blackbeak on the Glowing Planet along with the LMC's relentless marketing campaign. Combined, the demand for the Blackbeak should have spiked, and more people wanted to experience its magic.

He didn't consider that the DP could have come from the production of extra physical mechs.

Currently, Ves considered upgrading his Stealth Augment. Going deeper into the tunnels didn't only mean he would have to brave the spacetime anomalies. He also had to take into account the risk of bumping into a devourer or devourer king.

"It's too expensive. I can hold off the purchase until I actually need to hide myself."

Ves eventually decided to save his points and postpone his spending.

After a short nap, Ves set off with the armored shuttle and brought it many kilometers deeper. Though a lot of dangers lurked in the shadows, Ves studiously ignored the risks. The odds of actually bumping into a spacetime wrinkle shouldn't be too large.

"It's like walking across the street with aircars flying over your head. The chance that one of them crashes isn't very large, and the odds that it will land right on top of you is even smaller."

Even though he comforted himself this way, he still couldn't forget how these improbable accidents happened to destroy a lot of ships.

His slow journey towards the end of the tunnel dug by the Wrath set him to thought. Why did he have to stick out his neck and risk his own life this way?

Why couldn't he do anything to fight back against his thieving mother whenever she dropped by?

Why did he have to rely on Lucky to fend off a devourer king that managed to avoid the best efforts of the Mech Corps to take it down?

All of these incidents shared one common element. "I'm not in control."

The lack of agency was beginning to get at him. Even though his company earned billions of credits, he still ended up at the mercy of others.

Those who organized these kinds of expeditions could afford to throw a lot of manpower and resources into the mix. Why couldn't Ves do something similar?

The idea grew more appealing the more he thought about it. He didn't need to organize a large-scale expedition, but even a modest force under his command could accomplish a lot of things on his behalf. He already owned an excellent corvette to act as a scout or courier.

"It's not that expensive to get my hands on a few transports and converted carriers. However, it's going to take a lot of mechs and reliable pilots to give them some teeth."

He knew that contracting a reliable crew of pilots and spacers was by far the biggest challenge. If he chose the wrong men, they might decide to run off with all of his newly-purchased assets and disappear into the frontier.

"I can think about it later. There shouldn't be any need to go on an expedition right now with the war looming closer."

The armored shuttle successfully reached the bottom of the tunnel without encountering any mishaps. Though he encountered a few close shaves, the anomalies hadn't affected the shuttle in any way.

Once he floated outside, Ves threw Lucky towards the bottom of the tunnel. "Okay Lucky, go dig downwards."

His cat looked back at him as if he lost his mind.

"Just dig and tell me when you detect anything that's more energetic than a medium-grade Rorach's Bone. Make sure to leave enough room for me as well!"

It took a number of times to repeat his intentions to Lucky. His cat set out to dig a wide hole and go further downwards.

Ever since Ves found out that the high-grade Rorach's Bone didn't meet the System's needs, he resolutely fed it to Lucky.

As far as his gem cat was concerned, he might as well have gone to heaven. His cat took three hours to savor the fat piece of high-grade bone. His eyes narrowed blissfully as his body took in more and more of the extremely rare exotic.

Consuming the high-grade piece had definitely given Lucky a major boost. His body's exterior had turned into an even brighter shade of white. It was as if he had turned into a milky white cat. Besides the changes in his appearance, his other capabilities also improved by a major step.

At his current state, Lucky easily dug a wider tunnel. This allowed Ves to float behind him and descend into the depths alongside his pet. The floodlights embedded in his mining suit shed the tunnel in a harsh light.

This went on for a couple of hours. Occasionally, Lucky detected something attractive, and changed the direction of his digging in order to reach what had attracted his attention. It mostly turned out to be medium-grade Rorach's Bone.

"This is looking like a veritable boneyard here." Ves muttered. They encountered more and more bones the deeper they went. "Still, it's a shame I haven't found any high-grade ores."

He eventually had to call off the digging after reaching an estimated depth of two kilometers. Ves had grown extremely uncomfortable after digging so far away from the Gregarious Wrath. He picked up Lucky and floated back out of the tunnel before boarding the armored shuttle that rested nearby.

After a meal and rest, Ves donned his mining suit and floated down the tunnel dug by Lucky.

"Keep digging downwards. Go deeper."

His cat did as he instructed. Though Ves had a lot of misgivings at this point, he couldn't stop halfway. He had to see this journey through in the end.

After half a day of digging, Lucky noticed something strange. His digging speed became twice as fast and the cat practically raced towards a specific destination to the sides.

"What did you find, Lucky?!"

His cat kept digging as if his life depended upon it. After more than fifteen minutes of digging, he surprisingly reached a cavity. Once he dug out an opening, Lucky fearlessly jumped inside.

"Hey, wait for me!"

Ves had to wriggle his way through the opening before he could get through. Spotting his cat, he quickly flew towards the center of the oval chamber, where he came across a remarkable sight.

Lucky stood frozen as he beheld what looked like a neat array of bones. The strangest thing about the skeleton was that they shone in a luster closely related to Rorach's Bone. It was as if the set of bones that lay in front of him had been the source of the Rorach's Bone on this planet!

The reason why he came to that conclusion was that the area directly underneath the skeleton was made up of a mottled mass of medium-grade Rorach's Bone! That much Rorach's Bone in one place should be impossible!

"But why isn't there any high-grade bone?"

He regarded the skeleton with suspicion. Perhaps it needed time to contaminate the surrounding bones, or perhaps it already absorbed the quality materials to enhance its own structure. It would explain all the holes around the skeleton.

"That said, why does it look like a humanoid?"

The most remarkable aspect about the skeleton was that it resembled a huge human. It stood as tall as a light mech and Ves imagined it weighed about the same as well. Although the galaxy spawned a lot of humanoid aliens, they never precisely evolved to adopt a roundish head, hands with five fingers or feet with five toes.

"It's like a giant out of mythology."

Even the bones could be mistaken for a human if it wasn't so large. The uncanny resemblance to the human physique disturbed Ves in the same way when he first found out that the System had the capability to manipulate time.

He felt as if he brushed across a huge secret of the galaxy.

"It's dead now. It should be millions or billions of years since this alien died. There's nothing to be worried about."

Despite his rational words, he still treated the skeleton like a dangerous animal. Its shiny, sparkling bones radiated a certain kind of pressure that constantly tickled his sixth sense. Ves carefully stepped forward, passing by Lucky who still hadn't padded forward.

Once Ves reached the foot of the prone skeleton, he reached out a gauntlet to touch it, but then changed his mind. "Who knows if I'll trigger something bad."

He instead began to inspect the skeleton with his eyes and sensors. He wanted to find out if the remarkable skeleton was made out of homogenous material.

Once he swept over the entire mech-sized skeleton, Ves found one single anomaly that stood out from the rest. He detected strong fluctuations the brain cavity of the human-like skull.

"This... what is in this giant's head?"

He strongly suspected the skull hid an extraordinary treasure. From the energy readings alone, it surpassed a high-grade Rorach's Bone by far. It might even be a legendary piece of extreme-grade Rorach's Bone!

The more he thought about the possibility, the more his breath grew uneven. He flew away from the skull and returned to his immobilized cat.

"Stop being a scaredy cat, Lucky! Come on, I need your help!"

He scooped up his pet and returned to the skull. Even though Lucky squirmed in his arms, Ves didn't let go of him. Once he flew close, he held out Lucky and shook him up and down a few times.

"Can you please open up this skull? There's something yummy inside. Don't you want to take a bite?"

Lucky acted as if Ves was about to drop him into a bath. His pet kept trying to turn his body and claw away from the menacing skull. Ves had to press his cat flat against the skull in order to get him to claw away at the skullcap.

This time, Lucky failed to dig through the skull. No matter how many times he tried to claw at the dome, his paws failed to make a single dent.

Things only changed when Lucky activated his energy claws. He pumped a significant amount of power into his claws before letting loose with a swipe.

This time, the skull finally yielded. A shallow groove emerged, encouraging Lucky to swipe again and again. After expending a fair amount of energy, Lucky finally cracked open a tiny hole in the humongous skull.

A white light flashed out from the hole. The sheer intensity of it blinded his mining suit's sensors and scared Lucky out of his grasp.

More than just the lights, his sixth sense started pinging like crazy. Ves felt as if his entire mindscape had shook.



Fortunately, the light show ended a few seconds later. The glow subsided and his sixth sense calmed down. Ves sighed and carefully approached the hole until his helmet visor bumped against the hole.

What he saw inside caused him to gasp in surprise.

### **Chapter 314 Stolen**

Why did the skeleton of a giant humanoid ended up in the core of the Glowing Planet?

Was he buried underneath alone, or did the planet contain several other graves?

How long ago did the giant live, and how long ago did it die?

Why was there so much Rorach's Bone around the skeleton of the giant, and why hadn't the skeleton gone to dust all these eons?

So many questions swirled around in his mind. Much like any mystery he encountered, Ves ignored the implications of what he'd seen and focused on the more important priority: getting his payday.

Thus, when he saw the giant's skull contained, he couldn't hold back his glee.

A resplendent glowing jewel hovered at the center of the brain cavity. The jewel looked as polished as the most expertly cut gem, and shone in transparent white, as if nothing had ever tainted its purity. The more Ves stared at it, the more he guessed that it might be the origin of all of the Rorach's Bone in the vicinity.

"If this isn't what the System wants, then I don't know what can top this treasure."

After he finished admiring his find, Ves activated a function in his mining suit that extended a claw-like grip from his gauntlet. Its extra reach allowed him to reach through the hole and carefully grip the shining jewel.

Nothing happened when he pulled the jewel out of its resting place. Ves half-expected some kind of trap to go off, but nothing stood out. Even his sixth sense hadn't picked up any mental spikes.

Thus, with excruciating care, Ves pulled out the jewel and beheld it in his gauntlets. He suspiciously eyed Lucky, but it seemed his cat didn't show any interest in it at all.

"Hah, I forgot. You're a gem cat. This probably looks like excrement to you."

Lucky huffed, but never put down his vigilance. Ves took note of his pet's alertness. Danger still existed even if he retrieved his prize.

"Well, let's get this over with. System, here's your damn jewel. I hope I got it right this time!"

Once he offered the jewel to the System, Ves sighed in relief as the jewel started to dematerialize. It meant he finally hit the jackpot.

[Congratulations for obtaining the core and completing the mission. Exotic materials have a complex origin, and may be spawned by both nature and design. As a mech designer, you must understand the materials you are working with, and be able to distinguish the good from the bad.]

[You have received 10 golden lottery tickets. Please visit the Lottery page to redeem your tickets.]

[You have received a Special Upgrade Voucher (Machine). Please visit your Inventory to redeem your voucher.]

"I'm done! I'm finally done with this mission!"

It came as a huge relief to be finally done with this awful mission. Though the rewards looked promising, he would rather do without all of the danger.

As the jewel slowly disappeared, the System's message about materials put Ves to thought. He floated back and eyed the giant skeleton in the perspective of a mech designer.

"This skeleton looks awfully like the internal frame of a mech."

He'd only have to remove the superfluous parts like some of the ribs and he'd have a ready-made base for a unique mech. The bones must hold some very powerful properties to be able to persist like this. They looked as pristine as if the giant had died yesterday, if not for the lack of flesh.

"It'll have to be a mech that takes full advantage of these bones."

That meant he'd have to design something like a light skirmisher, which relied heavily on the soundness of the internal frame to pull off all those high-speed movements. Ves envisioned adding internals and armor plating around the skeleton. The skeleton seemed tailor-made for humanoid mechs.

"It's viable."

For a moment, Ves thought about claiming all of these bones. Then, he reconsidered.

"It's not as if the Mech Corps will let me keep such an important find."

Again, his lack of influence and his role as an external consultant limited his options. After a lot of thought, Ves sadly gave up on attempting to claim the bones.

Once the jewel finally disappeared, something changed. The giant skeleton abruptly started to break down. Its pristine white bones grew grey and turned incredible brittle before falling apart into lifeless chunks. A pulse of violent rage emanated from the center of the Glowing Planet and momentarily overwhelmed his sixth sense.

"Arggh!"

The entire cavern shuddered, and rocks began to fall from above. It was as if the entire Glowing Planet had gone mad.

"Lucky! Let's get out of here!"

Ves picked up his spooked pet and engaged his mining suit's thrusters. He flew into the tunnel Lucky had dug and carefully navigated it all the way up. This took quite a lot of time because the tunnel was too narrow for him to navigate at full speed.

In the meantime, the rage that his sixth sense picked up thrummed with violence. Ves didn't know where it came from, but the sheer power and reach behind the ripples scared Ves to death. It might even be the planet itself that was lashing out!

"Who the hell did I piss off?!"

In his haste, Ves mistakenly bumped against a turn in the tunnel. His mining suit gained some scuff marks and Lucky meowed in complaint, but nothing broke, so Ves resumed his flight.

All the while, the spacetime fluctuations began to grow in number. Some parts of the tunnel momentarily warped as if someone pinched that part of space. This alternatively widened or narrowed the tunnel in a random pattern. Sometimes, Ves had to prompt Lucky to claw their way out of a barrier that appeared out of nowhere.

One time, Ves almost bumped head-first into a section of warped spacetime. He had to careen his suit against the sides of the tunnel to stop him from turning into noodles.

"That was close!"

Once the wrinkle disappeared, Ves carefully passed by the section of previously-unstable space before accelerating out. It took a lot of minutes

before Ves finally reached the end of the narrow tunnel. He emerged in the much greater tunnel excavated by the Gregarious Wrath and flew towards his armored shuttle, only to realize that it had crashed.

The shuttle's entire starboard side suffered an implosion of some kind which compressed all of its materials into a single round ball the size of a tooth.

Ves cursed at the sight. "I'll just have to rely on my suit, then!"

Fortunately, his bulky mining suit contained more than enough fuel to reach the Gregarious Wrath. Ves flew upwards and tried to contact the Wrath.

"Mr. Larkinson! We've been trying to get in touch with you! Danger levels have risen to an extreme level. We advise you to return to the Gregarious Wrath as fast as possible!"

"I'm on my way, but the armored shuttle is a goner!"

"Noted. We've already sent out a rescue shuttle. We've already fixed your position so the shuttle is only a minute away. Hang tight!"

"Will do!"

The entire tunnel kept shaking as multiple spacetime storms ravaged the surrounding space. Ves figured he faced the same risks of being swallowed by them if he stayed still or moved, so he might as well continue flying towards the surface.

A light appeared from the distance. The rescue shuttle had arrived. It parked right above Ves, allowing him to fly up and reach its open hatch. An armed soldier pulled him inside and banged the button that shut the hatch.

"He's here! Let's move!"

The shuttle turned around and zipped back to the Wrath, where they could all take shelter underneath her dimensional smoothers.

"What did you find down there?! Did you trigger something?"

"Beats me! I only found a lot of bones!"

Naturally, Ves found more than Rorach's Bone, but he wouldn't admit to encountering the skeleton of a long-dead race of giants.

As the soldier subjected Ves to a brief interrogation, the shuttle successfully reached the Wrath without incident. Once it landed in the shuttle hangar, Ves exited the craft, shed his mining suit and ran towards the engineering bay with Lucky in tow.

Once he reached the engineering bay's command platform, he noted that Chief Petrisc was elsewhere. One of the senior engineers manned the consoles in his chief's stead.

"Where is the chief?"

"He's supervising the most difficult repairs."

"Okay. Can you tell me what's going on?"

"Not really. All we know is that the core has suddenly become unstable and that spacetime is going mad. The fluctuations are predominantly spatial in nature, but we've detected some temporal variance as well."

"Is the Wrath in danger?"

"The dimensional smoothers are holding up, but their effective range has decreased. They're getting stressed by all of the anomalies that are trying to affect the tunneler. The chief wants us to move within two hours to get away from these fluctuations. It gets better the higher up we go."

That put down some of his worries. In the next couple of hours, Ves stayed out of the way while the crew of the Wrath frantically tried to get the tunneler to move again. She didn't need to excavate a new tunnel as she should slither her way up through the tunnel she had already cleared.

This enabled the repair crews to skip much of the redundant systems. After more than three hours of clunking and improvisations, the Gregarious Wrath finally regained her ability to move.

"We're off!"

The giant tunneler feebly climbed her way up, but quickly picked up speed once it became clear her repairs held up.

Though she encountered some bumps in the tunnel due to the occasional spacetime flare-ups, her immense mass and power allowed her to bulldoze through any minor obstacle. To facilitate her race to the surface, several smaller tunneling vehicles flew ahead of the Wrath to clear any of the larger obstacles in the way.

In the meantime, Ves helped out with the miscellaneous repairs. Just because the Wrath regained her mobility didn't mean she was in good shape. In truth, she operated with almost no redundancy. If a single critical pipe broke from the stress, the entire tunneler would be forced to a halt.

No one wanted to envision such an outcome, so the repair crews rushed out to repair the pipelines. In general, such repairs didn't require an in-depth background on giant tunneling machines, so Ves easily contributed to the work.

He didn't even think about using his newly gained rewards. The situation was too hectic for him to play with the System. Besides, even with his Privacy Shield, he doubted he would ever be able to escape scrutiny for long. He could tell that some of the security officers kept a close eye on him. It was as if they suspected he played a role in the sudden outburst of the Glowing Planet.

"Do they really think I'm capable of triggering such a staggering response?"

Even if those suspicions had a lot of merit, Ves continued to play the victim and act dumb. Now that the System devoured the jewel and the giant skeleton turned to dust, there shouldn't be any proof left of what he'd done. He also messed with the hardware of the mining suit before he set off in his jaunt in order to make sure it didn't record his actions.

"I'm sure I didn't miss any hidden recording functions on my suit."

If any microscopic spying equipment had stuck around, then Lucky should have already taken care of it. Ves had trained Lucky to always swat away any microscopic bugs.

After reasoning that the Mech Corps shouldn't have gotten their hands on solid proof, Ves relaxed and continued to work.

Six days later, the Gregarious Wrath returned to the surface of the Glowing Planet. A much more disarrayed base greeted their sights. The spacetime fluctuations had been a little less severe on the surface, but the dimensional smoothers had their work cut out for them as the Mech Corps relied on them to cover a large radius.

The Mech Corps had no reason to detain Ves, so he was allowed to exit the tunneler and return to his friends. After questioning some of the base personnel, Ves got the gist of what had happened on the surface.

Both the Blood Claws and Walter's Whalers sustained significant casualties. This forced them to abandon their previous bases and seek refuge at the military. The Mech Corps only retained a crowded section of the Red Zone. Several different pirate and vulture alliances claimed their surroundings.

"I should get in touch with the gang. Hopefully they're still alive."

### **Chapter 315 Recalcitrant**

Ves sent out a flurry of messages on his comm. First, he contacted Melkor, as he could trust his cousin to brief him without any bias.



"Are you safe, Ves?" Melkor asked over the comm. His projected bust radiated fatigue.

"I'm fine. I've had some close shaves, but we've dug up a fortune in exotics. Even if they have to relinquish the majority to the MTA, they'll still make it off with a tidy profit."

"That's good to hear. It's been rather hectic on our end. As you can see, this base hasn't fared well in the last couple of weeks. The pirates under the instigation of the Dragons of the Void have ganged up on us. They wiped out the smaller outfits first before they tackled the main forces of the Mech Corps."

"Is everyone else okay?"

"Raella suffered a minor injury when her mech got swarmed by enemy mechs. She managed to eject in time, but she's suffered a bruise to her ego."

"As long as she's breathing, I'm fine with that." Ves replied with relief now that he confirmed that both his family members survived. "What about the Whalers?"

"Walter's Whalers had been one of the first gangs to go. They lost most of their mechs and a decent amount of pilots. They didn't eject in time."

Ves bowed his head. He predicted such an outcome, but he didn't wish it turned into reality. The Whalers truly hadn't been prepared to fight a grueling campaign. Hopefully they took their losses to heart and implement some reforms. They needed to shape up really quickly if they wanted to survive the impending war.

"What about Walter, Dietrich and Fadah?"

"They're doing great. They're better than the rest, and their mechs are of much higher quality than the walking pieces of junk they ordinarily use."

Together with Raella, they've made a name for themselves among the Blood Claws. Even the Mech Corps took note of their contributions."

"Sounds like you didn't fight alongside them. What have you been up to?"

"Nothing remarkable." Melkor shook his head. "The Blood Claws needed volunteers to patrol the outskirts and reconnoiter the approaches to the bases. I signed up for those duties because I've received prior training in these tasks."

Melkor earned a lot of contributions on his own by sniffing out enemy scouts. Even though he only skimmed over actions, Ves knew that Melkor had definitely risked his life a few times.

"Well, now that the Gregarious Wrath has returned to the surface, I think it's safe to say the Mech Corps will evacuate us any day now."

"There's only six days left on the clock. We don't want to be here when the armadas from the Hegemony and the Coalition arrive. Don't forget that there are no Lagrange points in the Glowing Zone, so we have to take the long way if we want to transition out of here."

A Lagrange point was basically a point in space where the gravitational force between several stellar objects canceled each other out. For example, a planet with a moon would have a Lagrange point somewhere on the line between the two. Such points in space provided ships with a quick and convenient way to transition into FTL.

The problem here was that the Glowing Planet had gone rogue. It obviously used to orbit a star system like other planets, but it had been cast out into space on its own. The lack of Lagrange points served to delay their departure significantly.

"This is something that the big guys upstairs will have to tackle. We don't have many options but to go along with whatever they have planned."

Although Ves could stuff the Stanislaw and a couple of people aboard the Barracuda, he held no confidence his corvette could make it out of the Glowing Zone on her own. Too many pirate ships lurked in the Glowing Zone like an endless school of sharks.

"I'll go meet with the Whalers. Since I originally contracted with them, it's best I stick with them to the end."

Once Ves hung up on Melkor, he sought the encampment within the base that held the Whalers. He found them at a distant corner. A sad collection of ships and broken mechs greeted his sights. Even now, the Whalers still acted like cheapskates by trying to take along the wrecks that belonged to their opponents.

"At least they have good taste." He nodded as he noted the overall quality of the wrecks. Much of them could be sold for ten million credits in the salvage circle. If Ves worked to restore them to a functional state, he could easily increase their value by twenty to thirty percent. "The margins are too low for me to bother."

He already ran a profitable business selling brand-new mechs of his own design. Only mech designers who couldn't afford to license any mechs or components dove into the repair industry. As long as they mastered some basic skills and possessed some common sense, they could comfortably make a decent profit.

It still represented a dead end in terms of career progression. The mech industry rarely appreciated the repair business. It didn't take much to establish a footing there and there were countless of competitors.

In any case, Ves sought out Walter, who looked like he had taken a massive blow. All of those casualties had obviously took a toll on the gang leader. He even looked like he lost some weight!

"Walter. I'm sorry for your losses. I don't think any of us had really expected there would be so many pirates."

The burly man snorted a bit and chugged down another gulp of his cheap beer. "It reminds me of my worst days back on Bentheim. The things I did... back then, I was just a jumped-up grunt."

Ves remained silent as he took a seat at Walter's cafeteria table.

Walter burped. "Well, it's not your fault and none of your business. I can take care of my own house. So what brings you here?"

"Did you receive any word on how the Mech Corps is planning to get off this planet?"

"Hahaha!" The gang leader laughed. "Oh, they did, and it's a doozy. I'll send you the outline of their plan, though do try not to spread it around. It's sort of classified."

After Walter transferred the file to his comm, Ves briefly ran his eyes through the document.

The plan was crude and simple. Every ship on the surface would load up and claw their way up to orbit at the same time. The sheer amount of ships should deter any potshots, though the coordinated maneuver would also attract a lot of major pirate groups.

The spaceborn Mech Corps assets that hung in high orbit would pave the way for the surface fleet by beating back the pirates that gathered along their trajectory. After that, the spaceborn fleet would continue to shadow over the landbound as they collectively limped their way to the edge of the Glowing Zone.

"This will take way too much time." Ves frowned. While the Mech Corps ensured their safety in numbers, they also had to limit their speeds to the slowest ship in their midst. "How are your spaceborn assets?"

"They haven't fought at all, so they're at full strength. They're lacking in experience and equipment, though. I'd appreciate it if you can take a look at their mechs."

"Will do."

After making some small talk with Walter, Ves left to seek out his baby. He always cherished the first production model of his Blackbeak. Once he reached the nearby mech stables, Ves found his distinctive black creation in a much more rugged condition.

Even without a log, Ves could tell what kind of battles it fought and how well it fared. He spotted a decent amount of abrasions, evident of high-speed maneuvers gone wrong. He also located plenty of weapon marks such as laser pits, shell craters and sword scars.

All of these wounds added character to the mech. As Ves beheld the sight, he imagined his mech's X-Factor absorbing all of these experiences, taking them as fuel for growth.

Due to all of the recent excitement, Ves failed to enter the right mindset to determine if his Blackbeak's X-Factor had changed.

"Hey Ves!" Fadah called as he approached from the side. "I heard you just returned. I ran over as soon as you heard."

"So what do you think about the Blackbeak?" Ves suddenly asked.

Fadah appeared taken aback. "Well, it's a fine mech. It's hard to explain, but your mech has grown on me. It's a fantastic ride by itself and it's even better when I bring it to battle. I always feel as if the mech is giving me an extra

push. That's not the case with my old mech. I often had to fight against her controls."

"What would you say is its best part?"

"Obviously her armor. It's amazing how much punishment it can take. Even if I always try to dodge every attack, I'm only human. The only reason I did well through all of those fights was because your mech always saved me from my own blunders."

Ves hadn't spent all of those merits in vain. The Veltrex armor system proved its worth in spades on this campaign. Its high upfront cost paid off in spades once the owners of the Blackbeaks realized how much money they saved on repairs.

"I see. Now that you told me what's the best part, what about the things that fall short?"

"My number one pet peeve is that your Blackbeak overheats too easily. It's mainly the fault of this environment, as my mech can't vent any heat through the air if there isn't any of it in the first. Still, I would never rely on the Blackbeak to fight in vacuum environments."

"I'll be sure to take that into account." Ves already knew about this problem.

"I'll likely design a variant that specializes in these conditions. There's not much I can do about the base model, however."

"As long as you know. Another thing that's troublesome is that the Blackbeak guzzles up a lot of medium-density mech-grade fuel. That stuff is pretty rare in the Republic. Almost every other mech runs on low-density fuel."

"That's the price you pay to run an advanced mech like the Blackbeak. Low-density fuel is too inefficient to run a mech worth at least sixty million credits."

Despite these grumbles, Fadah didn't sound very hung up about this issue. The majority of the mechs that ran on pure energy cells either turned into bombs or switched over to the undercharged versions that frequently bottomed out quickly. Fuel-based mechs fared best of all on the Glowing Planet.

Fadah's experiences helped Ves a lot in confirming his own predictions. The modified Blackbeak hadn't suffered any inexplicable mishaps. Its excellent construction and personal tune-up by Ves had ensured that the machine was mechanically sound.

It didn't break when it faced a lot of pressure. This was the most important point that Ves wanted to confirm. He designed the Blackbeak specifically to last a generation. It had to hold up in the most intense moments of war, and from what Ves had gathered so far, the Blackbeak amply met this goal.

Once he finished picking Fadah's mind, Ves left the mech stables and sought Raella. It was time to hear her recalcitrant cousin out. He spotted her at some dingy makeshift bar the Blood Claws had setup as a form of relaxation.

Ves stepped up behind her barstool. "I've been looking for you."

"Eep!" The young woman jumped from her seat and almost spilled her cocktail. "Warn a girl next time, will you?"

"Where's Dietrich?"

"Him?" She snorted. Ves smelled the alcohol from her breath. "He's in the infirmary. When the pirates ganked my mech, he tried to ride to the rescue like a white knight in shining armor. Too bad he forgot that he pilots a rifleman mech. Don't worry, he made it out alive, but he won't be able to move his left arm for a while."

"Raella, this is no time to get drunk. We'll be evacuating from the Glowing Planet at any moment now."

The Glowing Planet's rage had subsided by now, or most of it had been absorbed by its landmass so that barely anything had reached the surface. The most anyone noticed the changes was when a small quake rippled their drinks.

"You're not my parents! I'm old enough to make my own decisions now! And you know what, Ves? I decided it's not worth it for me to stay with the Larkinsons. I'm forging my own path in life, now! I'm joining the Blood Claws!"

### **Chapter 316 Sister**

He should have seen this coming. From what he knew about Raella, she had always behaved as if she had been cast astray from the path she initially set forth on. Her dream was to be a professional mech athlete.

Once she had been cast from the dueling scene, she never really knew what to make of herself. The Larkinsons likely sent her to Ves to find a new goal to work towards. The old fogies on Rittersberg likely wouldn't be glad to hear that she decided to hitch up with one of the most violent and infamous gangs on Bentheim.

"Raella, we've talked about this. You're making a big mistake. You only see the noble side of the Blood Claws. All of that power and wealth is earned through less than savory means. Joining them means you are contributing to the social ills of Bentheim."

"I know all of that! I'm not a naive little girl anymore." Raella grumbled as she pushed away her empty glass. "But you don't see the good they do as well. The Blood Claws sound scary because they want to be feared. If you look underneath how they work, you'll see that they're not so bad as long as you play by their rules."

"Those rules have no leg to stand on in the Republic's laws. Gangs operate in a very different layer of society than the military or the regular private sector.



Once you formally join the Blood Claws, you'll shut the door to a legitimate job. There is no way you can remain a Larkinson as well."

"What do you care about it?!" She spat back vehemently. "Is it great to be a Larkinson, when you're consigned to join the Mech Corps from birth? That sounds a lot like slavery to me! Well I've had enough of nagging uncles and aunties telling me what to do. I quit the family!"

Plenty of Larkinsons have distanced themselves from the family over the years. Unlike some of the other military dynasties, the Larkinsons have been very relaxed about the issue.

Don't want to be a Larkinson? Okay. We'll update our registry. Henceforth, you are not an official member of the family anymore. Just don't come crying back when you encounter a setback and you don't have a shoulder to lean on. You made your bed.

The choice to quit your family association meant you embraced freedom over duty. The Larkinsons didn't quibble too much over the loss of free-thinking offspring, thinking that it would be better to let them spread their wings rather than hold them captive in a cage. In that regard, if Raella really wanted to cast herself from the family, Ves had no means to prevent her from going through with her choice.

He still found it to be a very bad choice.

"Raella, please, think it over. There are many other outfits you can join instead. If you fancy a rough life, there are many reputable mercenary corps you could choose from. They'd love to employ a Larkinson like you."

She shook her head. "I'm not doing this for the money! You don't understand a single thing what I'm saying! It's like this. I don't fit in with the Larkinsons. They're all so serious about pursuing a career in the Mech Corps. Well, I don't want to be a cog in a machine. What I want is to fight alongside real comrades

who I can trust to watch my back. Mercenaries don't cut it. They fight for money and for a cozy retirement."

"Is fighting alongside a bunch of thugs and criminals any better?"

"Hey! They're not all brutes like in the dramas! Many of them are like Fadah and Dietrich. I envy them, you know. All of the Whalers act like brothers to each other. The Blood Claws already treat me like a sister that I feel more welcome in their midst than back at the Larkinson Compound. All I get from cousins like you are snide remarks and disapproving looks. I'm fed up with that!"

Ves understood that he couldn't convince Raella to reconsider her decision. He wasn't a man of eloquence, and neither did he have any experience in dealing with obstinate relatives.

After a couple more back-and-forths, Ves resigned himself to this undesirable outcome. This looked to be a real mess, especially considering that Melinda served in the Bentheim Planetary Guard. What if Raella and Melinda faced each other on opposite sides one day?

When Raella drunkenly stumbled back to her bunk, Ves sighed to himself. "The family won't like it if she jumps ship with the Blood Claws when the Republic is at the cusp of war. They'll take her defection as a betrayal."

Even though Raella wouldn't suffer any concrete punishment from her abrupt departure, henceforth she'd never be welcome at any of the family reunions.

"Whatever. It's her choice in the end. A gang is pretty bad, but at least she hadn't gone pirate."

At the very least, gangs operated in a grey area and could be relied upon to defend their territory when the Vesians came knocking at the door. Pirates on the other hand would cut down their own mothers in an instant and did not possess a single responsible bone in their bodies.

Ves spent the rest of the day preparing for the impending departure. Whatever plans the Mech Corps cooked up, he had no doubt that the pirates objected to their departure.

Everyone knew that the Mech Corps extracted a massive fortune from the red zone. Even if they hadn't heard about the Rorach's Bone the Gregarious Wrath recovered from the core of the Glowing Planet, the pirates would still attempt to chip away at their transports.

In the meantime, the Glowing Planet experienced a lot of turbulence. The sudden onset of earthquakes and the temporary spike in spacetime anomalies alarmed every outfit operating on the surface of the planet.

Even if the Glowing Planet's rage eventually subsided, many people held suspicions on what could have triggered the outburst. Both the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion received increased scrutiny for that reason.

Naturally, this also made it difficult to plan out their evacuation. Ves vaguely heard rumors that the Dragons of the Void had been organizing the disparate pirate alliances into opposing any departures by the two military forces.

This reality put the Mech Corps in a weird spot where they had to cooperate with the Mech Legion in order to maximize their chances of making it out intact. If they lifted off from the planet by themselves, then the pirates would completely commit their entire forces on a single target.

"Will the Mech Legion cooperate?"

The Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom had been locked into a bitter, generational struggle for supremacy. They almost never looked eye-to-eye to each other. How could they forge an agreement when they hardly shared any common ground?

As Ves had never personally taken part in a war against the Vesians, he found the idea of cooperating with the Mech Legion a distasteful but pragmatic choice.

Unfortunately, much of the 4th Bentheim Division disagreed. Off-duty mech pilots practically spat at their names when they talked about the Vesians. He imagined their Vesians counterparts doing the same on the opposite side of the planet.

Nevertheless, a small figure like Ves had no chance of taking part in the planning of such an important operation. He had to mind his own business.

"So the Whalers are leaving most of their non-mech hardware behind?"

"That's right." Dietrich said as he lay on the bed in one of the infirmaries. He suffered a minor breach in the cockpit that had mangled his arms. "While they're still worth a couple of million credits, they're all junk and they take up way too much space. My father would rather want to fill up his ships with containers full of exotics."

That made sense. Ves figured most of the other outfits would be doing likewise. "Still, all of those containers will weigh down the transports. Many exotics have a much higher density than regular alloys."

"We know, but we owe it to those who died to make it out with as much booty as possible. Dad wants to set up a fund for their families."

The mood turned a little grim. Though Ves hadn't witnessed any frigid battles, he could tell that the Whalers had changed.

The constant fighting grinded away their confidence and harvested the lives of their brothers. They lost at least half of their mech pilots and most of their mechs. Even if they mined a fortune in exotics, such a massive loss had dampened any enthusiasm about getting rich.

"We'll recover." Dietrich whispered. "My dad already filled me in on where he plans to spend all of that money. We'll be beefing our numbers. Besides recruiting mech pilots, we'll also purchase better mechs. Dad is actually thinking about buying some of your models."

"Good choice. I'll personally fabricate some for Walter if he knocks at my door. It's the least I can do."

"Have you seen Raella?"

"Yeah. She told me she wanted to join the Blood Claws. Please don't tell me you have a hand in that."

"It's not my fault!" Dietrich raised his healthy hand in innocence. "She can be a bit intense when it comes to earning fame. She doesn't think she'll be able to distinguish herself if she's serving in the Mech Corps. It's much easier for her to earn some fame among the Blood Claws."

Ves grew suspicious. "Is it because of Melinda?"

"Don't even start on Melinda." Dietrich groaned as he palmed his face. "You can't imagine how jealous Raella is over Melinda's duel against Captain Vicar. She's always thinking about a way to trump that achievement."

"Are the two of you still together?"

"Yeah... well, sort of. I don't think we can maintain a long-distance relationship." Dietrich hung down his head. "Ever since she hitched up with the Blood Claws, she became incredibly focused on her training. All of those battles polished her piloting style, so right now she's improving pretty fast. Compared to that, what's the use of a boyfriend? I should have never taken her to Bentheim in the first place."

Ves clapped Dietrich's shoulder in encouragement. "Man up, Dietrich. I'm not really good in relationships, but I think you still have a chance with her. Keep

training and make sure you can keep up with her improvement. As long as you're strong, she'll continue to respect you."

Actually, he had no idea what he was talking about. Ves merely wanted to console the Little Boss and encourage him to keep in touch with Raella. After all, how would Ves be able to keep tabs on her if she stopped corresponding with Dietrich?

"What about your own love life?" Dietrich pricked back at him. "I've never seen you with a girl, and you rarely go out in the city to get to know someone. You're not growing any younger, you know!"

"Ahem, that's none of your business." Ves stubbornly closed himself off. "Go back to healing. I expect the Mech Corps will begin their evacuation tomorrow. Even if you aren't fit to pilot a mech, you should at least be tough to endure some shocks."

The man on the bed began to frown. "It's going to be that bad?"

"I really don't know, but we should plan for the worst. Many pirates haven't brought sufficient mining equipment so they only harvested scraps compared to the bounty that the Mech Corps earned. Those pirates won't be able to hold back I think. Stealing other people's hard work has always been their modus operandi."

After discussing a bit with Dietrich, Ves left the infirmary and began to consider his own options. He considered using up his golden lottery tickets, but found no opportunity to be alone. The base was packed full of people and the Mech Corps kept a close eye on all of them. He also figured that the lottery tickets mostly held items related to designing mechs.

"With my luck, I won't receive anything relevant that will help me survive the coming days."

He returned to the Whalers and made his final preparations. Since the Barracuda remained up in space, Ves had to borrow a ride for himself, Melkor and his Stanislaw. He walked over to the rusty little mech carrier that would bring them into space and frowned.

"How old is this ship?"

### **Chapter 317 Last Stand**

The evacuation began in earnest the next day. The Mech Corps had already shuttered its mining equipment and loaded their transports with exotics the days before, but now they started to dismantle and pack in their high-value assets.

Most of the objects that took up a lot of space but wasn't actually valuable would be left behind. This consisted of things such as prefab structures and walls. Though they incorporated a fair amount of exotics, they relied more on their thickness than their material quality to withstand enemy attacks.

Compared to low value bulk goods, the Mech Corps would rather load up their transports with more exotics. Even filling up their remaining cargo space with junk exotics made more sense than to retrieve their walls.

The other outfits followed suit. They placed a high priority on shipping out their haul. Bringing back their mechs came at a close seconds. A fair amount of landbound mechs entered the carriers and strapped themselves down.

Due to the recent battles, many of the berths had become free. Their owners cleverly filled up the remaining space with additional containers of exotics.

Still, they couldn't put away every combat-ready mech. The massive movement attracted the attention of the surrounding pirates.

Their prey planned to make a run!

The pirate alliances pounced on the base without any explicit attempts to coordinate their attacks. They merely followed their instincts and acted on any signs of weakness.

The sudden but expected attack necessitated a strong defense. Many landbound mechs remained stuck on the planet and had to fight back the pirates that constantly swarmed their lines.

At a certain field of rocks and cliffs, the Stanislaw huddled forward with its rifle radiating a fair amount of heat. The rifleman mech looked like it had seen better days. Significant amounts of armor had peeled away from all of the lasers and explosive shells that had glanced off the frame.

"Incoming squad of pirate mechs!" Melkor reported, though his mech had already sent the telemetry of his sightings to the Blood Claws. "One light, six mediums, one heavy!"

"Say again, did you just mention a heavy?"

"It's a salvaged artillery mech! They'll likely deploy it on the high ground up ahead and bombard the walls from a distance!"

The Blood Claw operator on the other end of the channel cursed. "We've already depleted our stock of missiles and we don't have anything that can outrange a heavy artillery mech. We'll be sending out an oversized squad to take care of the threat. Hold your position and guide the squad to the artillery mech when they arrive. Can you do that?"

"Got it. My mech still has some fight left into it. I have to pay them back for scratching up my Stanislaw."

On a more open side of the battlefield, the pirates deployed their mechs in significant numbers. A swarm of mechs raced forward to overwhelm the defensive lines.



Raella, Fadah and Walter stood before the walls along with the rest of the Blood Claws and their affiliated groups. They had been tasked with keeping this patch of wall steady, and for the sake of their massive haul, they promised to defend this wall to their deaths.

Whether the Mech Corps believed the vow or not was another question.

In any case, the Blood Claws made their stand, and the pirates came running to challenge their conviction.

"Careful, lads. Not all of the pirate mechs are carrying undercharged energy cells. Aim for the upper torso or the legs if possible. Avoid the waist and lower back as much as you can. Ranged mechs, aim high and focus on knocking off their heads if possible. They're much easier to disable once they lose their main sensors."

As the commander of the Blood Claws instructed their men, Raella sighed and opened a channel to Fadah. "I bet I can take out more mechs than you. I'm not the Raella you've seen before."

"Fat chance!" The light mech specialist laughed. "Even with your fancy new mech, it still pales in comparison to what your cousin designed. There's no contest which mech is better!"

Ever since her Sliverath bought the farm, the Blood Claws prepared another mech for her to use. Though someone else had originally reserved the mech, the brass decided to hand it to her on account of her skill. Many of the mech pilots in the employ of the Blood Claws never enjoyed the amount of systematic training that any Larkinson potentate had gone through.

"Here they come!"

A wave of pirate mechs braved the base with fanaticism driven by greed and brainwashing. By now, everyone had heard of how the Dragons of the Void messed with the heads of the pirates and made them pliable to their orders. If

the Dragons of the Void wanted to throw away a thousand mechs, they could easily do so without any consequences.

It took a lot of courage to assault the Mech Corps directly. Many of the smarter pirate outfits had shown up on the battlefield but cleverly hung behind the first wave of idiots that had stormed ahead. Nobody sober wanted to lead the charge.

"Watch out for their energy cells! Take them out at a distance if you can!"

The defending side brought more ranged mechs than melee mechs this time. Once the pirates came within a certain range, all of the rifles and cannons spat out beams and projectiles at the incoming mechs.

Their fire focused first and foremost on the light mechs. The downside to charging forth in a massive uncoordinated swarm was that the light mechs didn't have much room for maneuver. They risked a collision if they juked too much and bumped into another mech.

Even then, it took a fair amount of firepower to score the first kills. Half of the mechs collapsed in a lifeless heap, but the other half exploded violently.

Some of those explosions affected the mechs next to them. A portion of the mechs that suffered the most substantial damage exploded as well as their overcharged energy cells discharged all at once.

The subsequent chain reaction disrupted the charge and plunged the formation into momentary confusion.

"This is our chance! Charge!"

The Blood Claws surged forward, closing the short distance that remained, and hammered into the confused huddle of pirates.

One thing the Mech Corps learned about these brainwashed pirates was that they lost their edge. In practice, they became more dim-witted and couldn't really think for themselves.

It was as if they had turned into human-form bots. Once you forced them into a loop of errors, you could easily shut them down.

Right now, the Raella sprung forth with her new mech. She piloted an advanced skirmisher mech called the Nimue, which notably featured a partial rainmant of compressed armor.

The Nimue blitzed past the front ranks of the pirates and sliced away at their arms. Though the strikes hadn't penetrated deep, she did manage to cut through some of the thinner armor around the arms and inflict some internal damage, therefore weakening the limbs.

"Hey! You're going in too deep!" Fadah called as he brought his Blackbeak in front of a sluggish knight. "Come back here, Raella!"

The enemy pilot in front of him recovered just in time to parry Fadah's sword with its shield. Still, he couldn't prevent Fadah from slipping to his flanks and sink the sharp edge of the Blackbeak's phoenix shield into its legs.

The pirate knight buckled a bit, opening it up for a stab through its thinner back armor. The Blackbeak pushed its weight into the thrust until the sword had reached the cockpit.

"That's one down." He muttered as he carefully retracted his sword in order to avoid bumping into the energy cells.

Many of the pirate mechs carried overcharged energy cells. Their wrecks remained a hazard even if they had been taken out safely. It only took one stray shot to set them off. This was why Fadah pulled his Blackbeak away as fast as possible. In recent times, every pilot acquired the habit of avoiding fallen wrecks. The risk of getting caught in a sudden blast was too much.

The wave of defenders eventually pulled back after having thinned out the pirate riffraff. Constant movement and sudden changes in direction served to confuse the brainwashed pirates even further. They didn't even realize their enemies had pulled out. They needed at least ten seconds to get a grip on the new situation.

"Open fire!"

The ranged mechs had cooler their laser rifles or changed the magazines of their ballistic weapons once the melee mechs went in. Now that they returned, the ranged mechs opened fire again.

This time, more explosions sounded out, as many of the fire focused on damaged and immobilized mechs. The chain reactions that resulted from the second volley destroyed even more mechs than at the start.

Once the ranged mechs reached their limits, they stopped their fire, prompting the melee mechs to set forth again.

The clever see-saw tactic made short work out of the initial wave of pirates. The onlookers who wanted to profit at the expense of the first wave hadn't been able to summon up the courage to follow up. The defenders hardly suffered any losses.

The mantises died too quickly for the orioles to pounce on the cicadas!

"Pff. The cowards." Raella taunted as she brought her Nimue back in line. Her mech suffered a fair amount of scratches, but the vitals all held up with the help of its compressed armor. "Why did they think they stood a chance in the first place? Even if they overran our position, they still have to deal with the reserves from the 4th Division."

Fadah tapped his finger against the armrest of his piloting chair. "You can't fault the pirates for making a last attempt. I got the sense that the Dragons of the Void never planned to take back these mechs in the first place. Just look

at them. They're mostly junkers that are worth ten million credits at most. A single container filled with junk exotics is worth at least twice as much."

That made a disturbing amount of sense. Even though the Mech Corps constantly thrashed the pirates, they kept coming back as if they literally held no value. By the time the Dragons gathered up these dregs, they only composed of a fraction of what they initially brought to the surface.

"Well, we should thank our fortunes that the Dragons of the Void have been so loose with their slaves. If they saved them all up, they could have overwhelmed our defenses with sheer numbers."

As the remaining defenders stabilized the lines, Ves watched on at the roof of one of the prefab workshops. He didn't have any use at this moment, as the time for repairs had passed. Right now, every available hand helped out with loading up the spaceships.

He looked out at the distance and imagined all the fighting that went on there. Ves had tapped into his Blackbeak's feed but lost connection on the way. Some of the communication lines had been cut for some reason or another.

"Maybe this is a good time to use up my lottery tickets."

No one paid attention to Ves at the moment. With pirates at their doorstep and ships that needed filling, the Mech Corps spared no effort in monitoring a single if somewhat special mech designer.

Ves carefully looked from side to side, and spotted nobody nearby. "Lucky, is anything monitoring us right now?"

"Meow!"

Lucky had already swatted away a few bugs. Nothing else had drifted close since then. Ves took that as an affirmative and sat down in an enclosed

corner. He brought up his comm and activated his Privacy Shield before he turned to the Lottery page.

Ten glistening golden tickets awaited his perusal. As always, the System went the extra mile to dress up its features. The tickets looked life-like and floated in front of Ves like an attractive school of fish.

"I hope you turn up something better than an old lantern or something."

Ves found the bronze and silver tickets to be a waste of time and DP. Even if he could buy them in bulk, he would rather use up his points in the Shop or Skill Tree. At least he'd get what he paid for in those cases.

As for these lottery tickets, if his luck bode ill, he might end up with ten complete duds. The risk of scoring ten straight misses weighed heavily on Ves.

"I'm not that unlucky, am I?"

### Chapter 318 Amastendira

A sense of cautious anticipation swelled inside Ves. The System held extremely high standards, and the golden lottery tickets should be worth the effort of retrieving that strange jewel from the core of the Glowing Planet.

"There's no way the System will hand over a crappy reward for a B-rank mission."

From his frequent dealings with the System, he knew that it would never stint him on his rewards. It held itself to a high standard in terms of its offerings. As impersonal as the System behaved, it displayed a very rigid sense of class.

Still, lottery tickets never guaranteed a pay off. That was the nature of gambling. Ves had no doubt that if he bought a bunch of bronze or silver lottery tickets from the System, he'd waste far more DP than he would gain in value from his wins.

Ultimately, the System profited.

That put Ves to thought. Why did the System work with Design Points? What did it actually represent?

"I gain Design Points for designing mechs and selling them to others. The more I design, the more points I earn. The more my mechs proliferate, the more points I receive."

The System obviously incentivized Ves to conquer the mech industry and make his designs ubiquitous. What he didn't understand was what the System got out of it. DP was a currency that Ves could spend on very real benefits, such as upgrading his Skills or purchasing a powerful item from the Shop.

"It's not fantasy money that the System uses to restrict my spending." He guessed. He didn't think that the System came with an endless reservoir of energy and rationed some of it out to Ves in limited amounts. "It's more as if the act of designing and selling mechs is empowering the System."

From what he could speculate, DP represented some form of higher energy, likely existing in the imaginary realm. Every mech he sold generated some of this energy, which the System somehow captured and digested it to fuel its own incredible workings.

A ridiculous level of technology underpinned these workings. Ves frequently admired the workings of the System. Whenever he thought he found its limits, the System surprised him with another capability. All of these wonders required an enormous amount of energy that not even a capital ship's reactor could supply enough power to these processes.

"It's impossible for me to figure out how the System works."

He lacked the technical background to even attempt such an analysis. Ves was like a caveman who stumbled upon an abandoned shuttle. He didn't need to know how it worked to press a couple of buttons and get the shuttle to fly.

"It's enough for me to work within the boundaries set by the System."

Even if the System had a nefarious purpose, for now Ves had little to fear. He only received plenty of benefits so far. It wasn't too late to throw it away if it ever became a threat.

He moved on to the lottery tickets, which continued to hover in front of him. The projection appeared so realistic that he could almost touch them if not for his hazard suit getting in the way.

Using up the tickets on an isolated rooftop of an empty workshop didn't seem very prudent, but Ves had nothing to fear so long as he kept up his trusty Privacy Shield.

Lucky also scampered nearby. With his pet on the prowl, no spy bugs should be able to get close enough to breach the Privacy Shield.

"Here goes nothing."

Ves extended a gauntleted finger and ripped apart the first golden lottery ticket. The entire thing shone bright before revealing the interface upon which he would draw his prize.

A bin materialized that held a bunch of golden balls. Each of them shone with an attractive luster, as if they hinted at a great treasure. Ves figured that he had to pick and choose which ball to take.

"Here goes nothing."

He held out his hand and dug it deep into the bin of balls. The balls all appeared to be made of solid gold, which made it difficult for his suited arm to extend into the bin, but he persevered. Once his gauntlet reached the bottom of the bin, he grabbed hold of a random ball that rested at the bottom and carefully retracted it out of the bin.



The ball he held began to shine. Its gold surface sparkled and dematerialized, revealing a great light hidden inside its hollow cavity.

[You have failed to draw a prize from your golden lottery ticket. Please draw again.]

"..."

Really? After so much fanfare, he wasted an entire ticket?

"Come on, System! This is such a big scam!"

Alright, so he confirmed that even golden lottery tickets could end up as duds. Even though he predicted the possibility, it never felt good to fail on the first draw.

Once he finished drawing the price, the bin stirred itself up and the balls began to bounce back and forth. Once the process finished, Ves could use up another ticket by drawing another ball.

"Next try then."

He drew out one of the balls at the top this time. When the golden ball began to shine, it split up to reveal a miniature object inside.

[Congratulations! You have received a 10-year production license of the following sensor component: Colchester Revisions 44-SBNC1341455A.]

"At least I got something this time."

His tone sounded remarkably flat, because he did not have a clue on the value of this sensor license. Neither the company name or the unspeakable codename revealed any hint of its true value. Just because he received a production license didn't mean he could apply them immediately.

A license had to fit his vision instead of the other way around. In addition, chances were high that the sensor component either underperformed or

demanded way too much exotics to be cost-effective. He'd have to check it out later to see whether the license held any use at all.

"If nothing else, I can always sell the rights to the license for a couple of billions credits."

In general, most production licenses could be sold or transferred to an interested party, though usually at a discount.

Ves put the matter aside and drew another ball.

This time, the ball shone much more brighter than the last one. It practically blinded his visor, causing it to automatically adjust. Something remarkable appeared out of the light.

A resplendent looking laser pistol materialized from the ball. Its beautiful appearance adopted a classy, vintage look. A generous amount of golden-like flourishes adorned its gleaming white surface, and the grippy, bone-plated grip automatically expanded its form to allow his gauntlet to wield the pistol properly.

Ves focused on the weapon in his hand.

[Amastendira - Inv]

Rank: Supreme

The Amastendira is a masterwork laser pistol hand-crafted by Pierre Femento, the renowned Rubarthan laser gunsmith. The Amastendira is part of a set of three pistols. It is rumored that the three pistols can be combined into a single super-rifle which can pose a threat to a cutting-edge mech.

On its own, the Amastendira is a fully-fledged laser pistol that can be compacted into an unassuming cube, allowing it to be pocketed. Once retracted, it can fire a variety of laser beams at a wide variety of power settings.

The efficiency of this weapon is directly related to its power settings. The Amastendira can fire up to five-thousand standard-powered beams before entering a one-hour cooldown cycle. Its renewable energy cell allows the pistol to constantly replenish its power and its dimensional heat sink enables it to shunt any heat into another dimension.

At maximum power, the pistol will only be able to fire ten beams in quick succession, and will need to cool down for at least ten minutes.

This unique work of art is the crystallization of Pierre Femento's life's work, but has been presumed lost. This weapon is has been partially reconstructed, but a significant amount of hidden settings still remain dormant.

"This pistol!"

Ves could not believe what he received. His dinky little backup pistol he holstered at his hip might as well be a toy in front of this slim and elegant piece of art. He could practically feel the X-Factor radiating out of this majestic weapon. This Pierre Femento must have designed and created it with an abundance of passion and love.

With bated breath, he slowly tightened his grip on the weapon, as if he was afraid it was an illusion. He was most impressed with its capacity to fire five-thousand standard laser beams without requiring any rest in between.

What did five-thousand consecutive shots means? It meant he could pretty much hold down the trigger and burn through a solid a solid piece of ship armor given enough time. It meant he could lay down as much fire as a full squad of infantrymen.

In addition, he noticed that the power settings could be dialed up to such a formidable level that he could burn through regular mech armor with a couple of focused volleys. Exoskeleton armor formed no obstacle at all.

"This is what I was looking for. Now I'm not so toothless anymore without Lucky."

Ves always found it grating to rely on Lucky to save him from a sticky mess. Now, with a formidable weapon by his side, he possessed the means to fight back, though he hadn't turned into a super soldier all of a sudden. Even the best weapons could be rendered ineffective if its wielder didn't possess the skill to wield them effectively.

Sadly for him, Ves only received basic self-defense training with pistols. His aim was far from ideal, which made this weapon a poor fit for him. He could tell that Pierre had designed this weapon for a highly skilled combatant, because it incorporated absolutely no form of aim assistance at all.

"An expert gunslinger doesn't need any form of help."

Despite this major deficiency, Ves still cherished this weapon.

"What does the 'Inv' stand for?"

[Any object that carries the suffix of Inv can be dematerialized into the Inventory offered by Mech Designer System with no limits.]

"Wow!"

Ves asked a couple of more questions, and for once, the System spared enough energy to answer his questions.

Any item above a certain rank could be held in the System's inventory, as long as he obtained it from the System in the first place. Amastendira happened to be an item that came with the rank of Supreme, which happened to be several times more remarkable than Lucky, who initially bore the rank of Gold when he initially received him as a gift.

Ves glanced over at Lucky, who didn't appear to be impressed by his fancy new weapon. The cat had transformed from a regular bronze-like gem cat to

an impressive looking bone-white cat. The amount of Rorach's Bone he ingested was virtually priceless, with the high-grade bone contributing the most to Lucky's newfound strength.

"Don't worry, Lucky. You're still the best gift ever."

Once he finished admiring his splendid-looking gift, he dematerialized it into his Inventory before going back to his lottery drawings.

His luck seemed to have run out over the course of the next draws. He encountered dud after dud.

[You have failed to draw a prize from your golden lottery ticket. Please draw again.]

[You have failed to draw a prize from your golden lottery ticket. Please draw again.]

[You have failed to draw a prize from your golden lottery ticket. Please draw again.]

[You have failed to draw a prize from your golden lottery ticket. Please draw again.]

He finally received a solid prize on his eight drawing.

[Congratulations! You have received a single-use Superpublish voucher! Use this voucher to activate your Superpublish ability on any of your solely-developed designs. This voucher will not use up your regular Superpublish quota.]

Compared to the Amastendira, this Superpublish voucher failed to excite him in any way. If he remembered correctly, the Superpublish ability enabled him to spontaneously improve any design by ten percent.

Before, he always held back on this ability because he had to wait for an entire year before he could use it again. What if he used it frivolously and later

ended up in a situation where he had to break past his limits to save his life? Thus, Ves always put the ability into a mental vault, and locked it away, never to be used unless his life was truly at stake.

Getting another chance at using the Superpublish ability granted him a lot more leeway with this ability. He planned to keep the voucher in his Inventory and save it up for a genuine emergency.

In the meantime, he'd use his regular Superpublish ability as often as possible in order to make full use of its possibilities. Even if Ves wouldn't be able to earn any DP for any designs improved in this way, he'd still be able to learn a lot from all of the changes.

Now, only two more lottery drawings remained. Ves itched his fingers for the final two balls.

#### **Chapter 319 End Run**

[You have failed to draw a prize from your golden lottery ticket. Please draw again.]

"Of course. Why not."

Ves shook his head as he received another dud on his next draw. Even a golden lottery ticket couldn't escape from the System's stingy grasp. It reiterated again how much of a bad trade it was to engage with this scam-like lottery business.

"I get the feeling it's a convenient way for the System to limit my actual rewards."

His distaste for the System's Lottery grew when he tried and failed to find a listing of the probabilities of winning any prizes. That was illegal!

Yet no matter how many times he nagged, the System remained inscrutable. He could only give up and draw the last golden ball with an apprehensive arm.

Once he retrieved the final ball, it shone as bright as the one that held the laser pistol. "This must be a big prize!"

Indeed, once the light had faded away, a translucent pill appeared in its midst. The entire lottery interface faded away now that he used up all of his golden tickets, but Ves didn't care as he stared at the compelling little pill.

"What is this?"

[Congratulations! You have received a Transcendence Pill. This object can be ingested to provide a powerful mental boost and break the human limit of any random mental Attribute without any lasting negative consequences. Ingesting the pill comes with considerable risk, and requires considerable mental and physical fortitude to survive the transformation process. It may take 1 to 88 days to complete this process.]

This time, Ves received another major prize. He had always been keeping his eye out on a way to breach past human limits. His endurance once reached past 2.0, but it reached that state in a highly unstable manner. His body slowly broke apart from the constant stress.

This time, the Transcendence Pill offered to do the same, but without any of the unsustainable elements. Even though the description still pointed out some risks, as long as he made the right preparations, there wouldn't be any lasting dangers.

"Still, if it takes up to eighty-eight days to complete the transformation process, then it's not a good idea to use it up at this time."

Right now, he was in the middle of a warzone. Soon, he'd be evacuated into space, but the danger only started from there. He could not afford to put himself under at this crucial time.

The System categorized the Transcendence Pill as a Supreme item, so Ves easily dematerialized it into his Inventory. Both his weapon and his pill would be absolutely safe there as long as his comm remained in his possession.

"It's too bad I don't have any way of upgrading my comm."

The fact that the comm that held his System could be taken away at any moment represented a major weak point in his security arrangement. Ves had been eying some comm upgrades in the Shop that could alleviate these risks, but right now he was loath to spend so much DP.

Overall, leaving aside the Special Upgrade Voucher, Ves received a fair amount of compensation for all of his trouble. The Amastendira met his need for a powerful self-defense option while the Transcendence Pill saved him the trouble of figuring out a way to break the human limit on his own.

As for the sensor production license, Ves reserved his judgement on it. He'd check on it once he returned to Cloudy Curtain.

"It really sucks that I've only scored three prizes out of ten draws."

With a tentative success rate of forty percent, golden lottery tickets sure provided an unsteady amount of value. Even if three out of the four prizes appeared to be exclusive items that provided benefits that couldn't be found in the Shop, it still didn't change the fact that it had been a risky exchange.

He glanced over at Lucky. His cat acted a bit grumpy as Ves fawned over his shiny new toys.

"Are you jealous?"

Lucky flicked his tail and turned around, ignoring Ves entirely.

Ves didn't take his pet's behavior to heart. "Let's go downstairs. It's about time we board our ride."



He walked down the stairs and sought out the beaten-up Happy Jelly. The transport converted into a mech carrier hadn't fared well on the surface. Sporadic long-ranged bombardment had struck the carrier, chipping away at its rusted armor coverage.

The Whalers patched up the craters as best they could, but they obviously hadn't been very proficient in the repairs. Even Ves could do a better job on his own.

Still, he figured it would be better for him to stick with the Whalers as they all came from Cloudy Curtain. It wasn't to the point where he trusted them with his life, but they had more reasons to keep him safe than the Blood Claws or the Mech Corps.

"Ves! You're here!" A suited Whaler waved at him as he supervised the final loading process of the Happy Jelly. "I've been wondering whether you'd come. I thought you hitched a ride with the 4th Division."

"The Mech Corps can be kind of touchy about letting me board their carriers." He responded. "Right now, they're focused on breaking through the pirate blockade in space. Having me around is a security risk."

"Couldn't you have traded some favors to get aboard their ships?"

"It's not worth the price."

Indeed, he already inquired about the possibility. Perhaps because of his shenanigans aboard the Gregarious Wrath, the Mech Corps put up a list of strict demands for Ves to continue his association with them. He rejected them because he didn't wish to start his draft at this time.

"How far is the loading process?"

"Everything essential is loaded up. We're only waiting for the final phase. It's going to be a tough time trying to load up all of the mechs that are fending off the pirates at the walls."

Ves nodded at that. It couldn't be helped, as the pirates continued to pour inside the red zone. They hungrily eyed the transports filled with higher grades of exotics. As long as they could shoot down one of them, they'd be able to salvage more than what they mined from the planet on their own.

"I'll go inside. Don't stay out for too long!"

As he entered the familiar badly-maintained interior of the Happy Jelly, the dirt and rust didn't look so awful anymore. Ves had the sense that he returned home. It was as if the Happy Jelly called out to him and told him he belonged.

Sadly, much of the recent deaths had hollowed out the ship. Many of the mech stables that ordinarily held mechs had been filled with cargo containers. The Jelly expected much fewer mechs to return to their berths this time.

The high level of losses sustained in this campaign had put a definite dampener on the mood of the crew. In his time among the Whalers, Ves found out that much of the members shared family relations with each other.

People recruited their brothers into the gang, and sisters married any man they found dashing. Among the Whalers, the mech pilots represented the apex of the organization, so it was a given that they all left a large number of widowed husbands and wives.

"If so many people die in a single campaign, then I get why my mother is so averse to conflict."

Thinking about his deceased mother ruined his mood as well. He had no idea what to think about the ghost who stole a big prize from underneath his nose. Though it eventually made no difference as the high-grade Rorach's Bone

failed to meet the conditions to complete the mission, he still found it to be an awful experience.

At least he could finally say goodbye to this pernicious thieving ghost. The Glowing Planet and all of its secrets would soon become a headache for the Hexadric Hegemony and the Friday Coalition to deal with. They possessed plentiful tools to deal with energy beings like the ghost.

"Not that I'm helpless like before. This time I've got the Amastendira on my side."

One particular benefit of the mastercrafted laser pistol was that it came with a setting specialized in hurting energy beams. Ves actually looked forward for the ghost to appear in his midst again. He had a nasty surprise in store for the sticky-fingered creature.

With the death of many mech pilots, a couple of cabins became ownerless. The Whalers assigned him one of the best and roomiest cabins this time. They even went through the trouble of cleaning up the place and removing all of the effects of the previous occupants.

Lucky roamed around the roomy cabin, meowing in satisfaction. Ves stowed away his luggage before stepping out of the cabin. He knew the Whalers lacked a solid team of mech technicians and could use a solid kick in the butt.

Once he entered the Jelly's workshop, all of the mech technicians looked towards Ves. Almost everyone had worked under him at some point at the start of the campaign so they instinctively lowered their heads at his presence.

Inventing the undercharged energy cells also added to his prestige. Ves didn't even have to say a word to take over the entire workshop deck.

"Give me an overview. How many landbound mechs are we expecting and how many spaceborn mechs does the Jelly carry?"

The oldest-looking tech stepped forward. "We're expecting five landbound mechs, which includes the Urmech, the Blackbeak and the Stanislaw. As for spaceborn mechs, we only carry two of them. Would you like to see them?"

"Yes. They're vital to the defense of this carrier. Before we lift off from the Glowing Planet, I want to make sure they're in fighting shape."

While the technicians led the way towards the two spaceborn mechs, over at the perimeter of the base, the open field had turned into a torn and broken landscape.

An abundance of wrecks littered the site. While a fair amount of mechs looked reasonably intact save for a hole in the cockpit or a cut to their limbs, an even larger amount of debris looked like they had gone through a storm.

Many pirate outfits lacked the connections or fabrication capabilities to supply their mechs with undercharged energy cells. This led to a judicious amount of explosions that hurt their side more than their opponents.

"I think it's about time we pull back." Raella muttered as she cast some of her sensors to the ranged mechs firing from the wall. "Some of the rifles have run out of ammo."

"There's still another wave of pirates heading in our direction." Fadah noted as he beheld the loose arrangement of pirate mechs coming up to the debris field. "Hah! They sent so many mechs at us that they have to watch their footing!"

The sheer amount of wrecks inadvertently blunted much of the later pirate waves. In addition, the Dragons of the Void had exhausted much of its cannon fodder. They had to prod the other pirate alliances to pick up the slack, with mixed results.

"This latest bunch look dangerous, though. They've brought multiple heavy knights to the fore. I thought pirates shouldn't be able to produce these kinds of mechs!"

"That doesn't stop them from stealing them." Fadah explained. "In fact, it looks a lot like this outfit raided a military supply depot. These mechs are sporting serious hardware."

Fortunately, the Mech Corps finally sent the recall signal. The ships had finished loading the final cargo. Now, they only awaited the final batch of mechs that defended the perimeter.

"Let's go! This is the end run!" The commanding officer of the Blood Claws transmitted to the mechs defending this corner of the base. "Don't panic and don't run ahead. Stick to the plan and pull back in an orderly fashion!"

Thousands of mechs across the entire base collectively shrunk back. They pulled away from the walls and briskly headed towards the mass of carriers that awaited their arrival.

The pirate mechs noticed the retreat and hastened their way through the debris field. Both sides tried to reach the center and fight the final battle on the surface of the Glowing Planet.

This was the end run.

### Chapter 320 Wasteful Ploy

At first, the pirates approached without contest. Once they walked past the debris field, they bypassed the walls and trudged into the interior of the base. Their prey had gone ahead and retreated towards the center of the base, where a host of ships awaited their arrival.

Surprisingly, the pirates hardly encountered any opposition. The lack of any obstacles among the empty prefab buildings lulled them to a sense of

complacency. They unconsciously dismissed any threats among the empty streets and gathered up their numbers before they approached the final defensive envelope.

A fair distance away, at the very center of the red zone, a horde of mechs started to load up to their carriers.

Badly damaged mechs entered first, followed by ranged mechs that expended all of their ammunition. Only a final defensive line of laser rifleman mechs and undamaged melee mechs held their ground.

Alongside these mechs, a large number of anti-air and anti-missile turrets dotted the massive landing field. These formidable military-grade turrets fended off the occasional orbital and missile bombardment as well as any mechs that approached from the ground. A handful of turrets specializing in fast response even reacted swiftly enough to intercept ballistic shells.

The only way to break through the final defensive line was to commit to an all-out assault. Even though the final defensive line intimidated the pirates, their courage continuously swelled as their numbers grew.

On the opposite of the pirate mechs, Raella grinned as she looked forward to the show to come, though she sighed as she thought of her Nimue.

Her light mech hadn't fared too well in recent deployments. Many of its compressed armor plates showed signs of intense blows and some of them had even been peeled away. This meant she had very little buffer left to absorb further damage.

"Will they fall for it?" She asked.

"They're not acting like they've caught on." Fadah said as he sat in the cockpit of his worn-out Blackbeak. His mech had fared better than Raella's, but consecutive battles had stripped quite a bit of layers from its Veltrex armor system. "This is our last gambit. If it fails, we'll be having a rough time."

Fortunately, the pirate mechs cluelessly congregated in the open fairways between the abandoned prefab structures. Their standard sensors detected no explosives and not a hint of undermining beneath their feet. Thus, they swarmed into the base without reservation.

Once the numbers turned from hundreds to thousands of mechs, Colonel Ilos who commanded the evacuation issued an order. "Set off the trap!"

The prefab structures blew up all at once. The explosions had been synchronised down to the microsecond, leaving no opportunity for the pirates to take any precautions at all. Over fifty percent of the base suffered devastating explosions with a familiar electric bent. It turned out those prefabs had been stuffed with overcharged energy cells!

Screams filtered out into the open channels as the lucky ones survived with mangled mechs. As for those who used the prefabs as cover, both their mechs and their pilots had been torn apart from their proximity to the blasts.

The level of violence thrummed throughout the base and even the defenders had to fight to keep their footing. The massive shockwave from the simultaneous explosions even shifted some of the ships!

As the explosions faded, Raella struggled to understand why the pirates hadn't detected the energy cells. "How did the Mech Corps managed to fool their sensors? By now, every mech has their detectors peeled for overcharged energy cells."

"It's because the Mech Corps came with a specialized design that's purpose-built as a bomb." Another pilot in the channel said. "You see, those mech sensors are calibrated towards detecting mech-sized energy cells, but the base has lots of tools that run on smaller energy cells. If the sensors picked all of those smaller energy cells up, the pilot would eventually grow deaf from all of the alarms, so they are all set to ignore the cells below a given size."

Raella understood the ploy. "I see. So instead of making one large cell, you produce lots of smaller ones instead, and bunch them together so their chain reaction is still as devastating as the explosion of a single cell."

Even though the magnitude of the explosion hadn't managed to envelop the entire pirate force, it still brought a devastation to their ranks. At this stage, they lost at least a third of their mechs outright. Another third sustained moderate damage, while the rest got off lightly.

However, even if they still retained enough mechs to overwhelm the defenders, they completely lost their confidence. The devious trap that had devastated the entire outer base had completely smashed their illusions of achieving an easy win.

Some of the ornate mechs at the rear showed up to stiffen up the pirates and prevent them from turning back. A swordsman mech with dragon patterns even strode ahead and beheaded the cowards mechs who had already turned back.

"There's no way back!" Takeru shouted over the channel. "The Mech Corps is at the end of their ropes! Look forward and don't turn back!"

To add some weight to his words, the Dragons of the Void decided to launch their own gambit early. Something twinkled in the airless sky, prompting the anti-air turrets to swivel upwards and fire lasers and projectile at the incoming threats.

The Nimue possessed better sensors than most of the other mechs, so it easily resolved the incoming signatures diving towards them from low orbit.

"Incoming kamikaze ships!"

That set off a throng of alarm. One of the most prevalent and destructive means to circumvent the MTA and CFA's taboos on developing weapons of



mass destruction was to employ massive objects originally built for another purpose as payloads.

The amount of damage a single multi-ton ship could deliver upon crashing was immense, and right now over a hundred ships of varying sizes headed straight in their direction.

"Shoot them down!"

Fortunately, the Mech Corps hadn't completely dismissed the possibility of such a tactic, though they never thought the pirates had the guts to commit so many ships. The anti-air turrets started overheating in rapid succession as they struggled to blast apart the sturdy ships.

The transport vessels broke up easily enough, but the converted carriers often carried substantial armor at their bows, making it incredibly difficult to wear them down from the front.

"Mechs, help the turrets. Their firepower isn't enough!"

The ranged mechs all aimed their weapons at the sky and fired them without concern for ammunition or heat. Even some of the melee mechs with backup pistols contributed some of their firepower.

The enormous weight of fire had effect, but not enough. Though the defenders easily took down half of the ships, those had been the easy targets. The rest absorbed a lot of concentrated firepower until they eventually broke up.

Even then, the debris remained a threat. They'd been carried forth in a parabolic arc that ensured that any pieces that emerged would continue to sail forth until it hit right in the middle of the base.

Some of the kinetic turrets and cannoneers had been tasked with knocking these pieces from their trajectory, but it was like pouring water through a sieve. Too many chunks emerged from the wrecks.

"Brace for impact!"

Eventually, the turrets exhausted all of their firepower and managed to destroy most of the ships.

Only a couple of intact ships crashed in the giant landing field. Those that collided directly with stationary ships blew up in an awesome conflagration that affected the closest ships in the vicinity.

Others missed the mark and impacted empty terrain, but the blast and the sheer amount of shrapnel heavily damaged several mechs and ships.

In actuality, the falling debris caused much more damage. Most of the fleet carriers and combat carriers made it out with scratches and dents. Their robust construction and plentiful armor cladding enabled them to shrug aside most of the blows.

The converted carriers and transports fared much worse. The Blood Claws lost six ships when the heavy remains punched through their relatively thin armor and impacted the engines or power reactor. Many other outfits suffered worse.

Worse, much of the debris field fell upon the mechs on both sides. The pirates cursed as they tried to move out of the way of incoming debris that had gone astray, but most of the pieces fell amid the defenders.

Fadah suffered a spate of bad luck as a sharp section of ship armor tore aside his entire shield arm. The momentum of the blow forced his Blackbeak into a spinning crash.

"Fadah!" Raella yelled, though she had no time to help her comrade in arms. She clumsily tried to dodge the smaller pieces raining down upon her Nimue.

"I'm okay!" He said as he instructed his mech to drop its sword and pick up the discarded shield. The Blackbeak tried to lift it up in front of it to face the incoming rain of terror. "I can take care of myself!"

Even the Happy Jelly suffered a lot of scratches as a torrent of fine components scratched her outer service. Luckily, she escaped the worst of the incoming debris as she'd been posted at the edge of the landing field. All of the pirate ships had originally aimed to hit the center of the field where all of the most valuable transports resided. They'd been filled to the brim with high-value exotics.

Indeed, many of those transports suffered substantial damage, and a fair amount had been destroyed outright. Despite the tragedies unfolding in their midst, Colonel Ilos kept her calm and urged the mechs to retreat to the surviving ships.

"The pirates have given us all they got! They don't have anything left to threaten us! Board your ship as fast as possible! We depart in ten minutes!"

Trying to load every defending mechs onto the carrier within ten minutes was a tall order, especially with the sheer amount of confusion going on. Some of the mercenary mechs who'd lost all of their carriers had to beg the other outfits for a berth.

To their credit, the gangs and mercenary corps with space to spare had welcomed these orphaned mechs. They all experienced the same disaster, so they unconsciously grew closer to each other.

Most of the mechs that survived the attack managed to get to their carriers in time. As for the mechs that lost their mobility, their pilots decisively abandoned them and ran towards the nearest ship on foot. Still, not everyone made it to their ships for various reasons.

After a couple of minutes of delay, Colonel Ilos finally had no choice but to cut off the final stragglers.

"Lift off!"

A majestic sight appeared when thousands of ships ascended from the landing field at the same time. Some of the pirates who regained their wits shot their weapons at them, but the sporadic volume of fire barely tickled the vessels.

The Glowing Planet exhibited lower gravity than the standard Terran norm, so the ships accelerated upwards with ease. The ships quickly boosted out of range and departed from the surface at a clip pace.

Inside the Happy Jelly's workshop, Ves had constantly kept an eye on the situation happening outside. Even as he supervised some last-minute field repairs on the Happy Jelly's spaceborn mechs, he still couldn't help but feel powerless.

"It's impossible for me to influence a battle with thousands of ships and mechs."

The Mech Corps had the situation well in hand, but even then Ves hated the thought of being a bystander. His moody thoughts affected his disposition, which in turn cowed the mech technicians acting on his instructions.

He started to get the hang of managing subordinates. Leadership came increasingly natural to him once he established his authority.

The Amastendira he won from the lottery also strengthened his nerves. The laser pistol he used to keep at his side had barely given him reassurances that he could take out any personal threats by himself. Ever since he received the mastercrafted laser pistol, he gained a lot of confidence that he could even take out a full squad of exoskeleton soldiers.

The thought of wielding so much firepower unconsciously bled through his attitude. People who looked at him regarded him as an elite.

Ves didn't care what others thought of him. He constantly kept his eye on the projected proximity plot which broadly displayed the tactical situation of the ascending fleet. They slowly climbed up to orbit, where a friendly spaceborn fleet awaited their arrival.

Ominously, many pirate vessels had begun to converge along their projected trajectory. The pirates weren't willing to let them go.