

Chapter 381 Looming Threats

Time flowed by as Ves fully immersed himself into designing the rifleman mech.

The crystal golem in his mind frequently added its own input on the design as well, leading to frequent changes that turned the design's appearance into something unique.

The most drastic change entailed hunching over the posture of his design. Ves went short of imitating the extreme angle of the crystal golem's original race, but even then the change looked obvious.

Ves even figured that the hunch would make his mech more distinctive, although it also made it harder for the mech to turn its head to the rear.

The change in posture shifted the balance of his design and forced him to perform a lot of extra calculations in order to prevent his mech from tipping over.

He spent most of the first month into fleshing out his design's internal architecture. While the crystal propagator installed in the center of the chest introduced a lot of complications, Ves possessed enough competence to adapt to the situation at hand.

This wasn't his first rodeo, and nothing could top the internal complexity of the Caesar Augustus design. After working extensively with Jason Kozlowski's debut design, Ves ceased to be impressed with mechs that only hosted two different weapon systems.

"It's not that hard to accommodate another weapon system on a rifleman mech design."

Ves merely had to ration his weight and space allowances carefully. The internal architecture that he came up with for his rifleman mech design

reflected his earlier priorities. He added as much compartmentalization as possible, but cut short the level of redundancy.

In any case, Ves put his faith on the armor to prevent the worst from coming to pass. It would still take a decent amount of effort to get past his design's compressed armor.

Since Ves recycled most of the component licenses he acquired for the Blackbeak design, Ves did not have to puzzle over how to integrate them into his second design. He already knew how all of the parts performed and what kind of conditions they demanded.

The power reactor, the Trailblazer engine, the cockpit and a lot of other components that Ves previously implemented in the Blackbeak design smoothly integrated in his rifleman mech design. Ves only faced some challenges when he attempted to slim down the components in order to free up a bit more weight and space.

Modifying third-party components came with a lot of risks, and almost no Apprentice Mech Designer would attempt such an action. Ves only went through with this move because he possessed enough knowledge to understand some of the inner workings of these components.

Still, most of the components already went through countless optimizations, so Ves did not free up that much capacity. Some of his modifications came paired with minor losses in performance.

Ves already took into account that a lighter mech had to sacrifice some capability in order to increase its mobility. Even if he used the same components as the Blackbeak, his first and second designs fulfilled different roles, thereby necessitating a lot of adjustments.

He finished up the work in three weeks, which was fairly fast by his reckoning. Ves spent the next two weeks on simulating the performance of the internal structure and tweaking it to eliminate any faults.

The tests and simulations revealed a lot of sub-standard implementations that unnecessarily lowered the performance of his mech. Ves spent a lot of time to correct these mistakes and smoothed over the performance of his mech's internal design.

"That should wrap it up." Ves said at the end of the first part of the design phase. "The hardest part is over now."

Ves accomplished a lot of work, including getting the central laser propagator to work. Still, Ves only came up with an untested application. It remained to be seen if the gimmick performed as expected.

Starting from the second month, Ves worked on the exterior of his mech, including the armor system and the laser rifle.

Before he started work on them both, Ves took the time to take a day off and check in with his company. He left his private workshop floor with Lucky in tow and visited the different departments.

Everything appeared to go on track, although the sales of bronze label Blackbeaks had dropped to its lowest level.

"Demand for the bronze label Blackbeaks are stagnating because the third-party manufacturers have met the immediate demand for this specific design." Gavin answered Ves when he visited the marketing department. "Elemental Mech Engineering is particularly worse off since it primarily serves the domestic market. You have to understand that the Blackbeak, while fairly popular, is a premium offensive knight."

"I understand." Ves nodded. "Both its type and price segment limit the popularity of the Blackbeak. It's never meant to take over the market for knights."

By now, EME only devoted a single production line to producing the Blackbeak. While they still sold some Blackbeaks every week, the sales volume was a far cry from when the design still enjoyed a lot of hype.

"What about Vaun? How are they faring trying to push the Blackbeak across the border?"

"It's the same as EME, but multiplied a couple of times. While they've never been able to conquer a lot of market share in any of the foreign markets, they're making plenty of sales when you add up the modest demands of more than a dozen different states. They're currently exporting the Blackbeak to twelve states and counting. All of that adds up."

This benefited the LMC as well, since Vaun Industrial payed 3.5 million credits per mech. Currently, it was difficult to predict how many Blackbeaks Vaun would be able to sell each month, but Gavin spent a lot of time on analyzing the foreign markets.

"Right now, Vaun is in a good place. They're easily able to export more than a hundred Blackbeaks a month. It will be tough to push more mechs than that. This means that at a minimum, the LMC can expect to receive at least 350 million credits in licensing fees."

Naturally, like any income stream, these earnings didn't take into account the various overhead costs and other expenses of the company. In particular, the loan the company took to finance the Benson production lines significantly increased the company's interest burden.

Still, the LMC's financials looked good enough to Ves. "We're making far more money than we spend, even with all of our recent expansions."

"That's true, but there's still a war going on." Jake replied after he went over the financials with Ves. "There's a recent spate of destructive going on in the Bentheim region. It's only a matter of time before the Bentheim System itself will get hit, and Cloudy Curtain might get swept up in the chaos as well."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we should prepare for the worst."

Ves turned serious at those words. "I know there's a possibility the Vesians decide to raid our planet, but we've already made as much preparations as possible. We've upgraded our contract with Sanyal-Ablin Security Services and I've even set up the Avatars of Myth, although they're still in infancy. However, our main source of security is our relationship with Walter's Whalers."

If the Vesians decided to raid Cloudy Curtain, the Whalers couldn't sit by and let the Vesians run amok on their home planet. Gangs enjoyed a complicated relationship with states. Any gang that claimed a planet but failed to defend it against foreign aggression would be pushed from their position of power.

Even though such a measure would be costly, the Mech Corps had swept up these kinds of cowardly gangs enough times to demonstrate their point. Every citizen of the Bright Republic must defend their homes if able.

Still, just because the Whalers possessed the obligation to defend Cloudy Curtain didn't mean it had to defend every location. In practice, gangs mainly held on to their core territories while letting the invaders lay waste to infrastructure that no one except the Republic cared about.

"The Whalers are our friends, and they know how much benefits the LMC brings to this planet. They'll definitely lend a hand if the Vesians wants to raid the Mech Nursery."

Jake looked a bit skeptical at Ves. As a former retainer of the Larkinsons, he was no stranger to partnering up with the less respectable parts of society. Still, the gang culture in Rittersburg was nowhere nearly as intense as the gang culture of the Bentheim region.

"If you say so, I'll believe you, but it's better to prepare too much than prepare too little."

"What is your suggestion?"

His COO put forth a bold proposal. "I suggest we hire a mercenary corps for a couple of months. We need a lot more mechs to fend off even a minor Vesian raiding party. I don't know if you haven't heard yet, but there's word that the 3rd Imodris Legion is circling around the Mech Corps in order to reach the Bentheim region. All hell will break loose if they succeed."

Ves frowned deeply at that information. Even Ves hadn't heard anything about the Vesians sending an entire legion deep into Republican space. However, if Jake mentioned it to Ves, then the news must be true. The Larkinson Estate must have informed the man.

"I see. In that case, the risk of hiring a couple of bad apples don't look so bad." He replied after considering the matter. "You have my permission to hire a mercenary corps. Just one. I don't want any complications. Make sure they're trustworthy. I don't mind paying above the market rate in order to ensure their quality. Just don't set a lengthy contract term."

A defense contract under these circumstances cost a lot of money, although they charged a lot less than dedicated security companies such as Sanyal-Ablin. The costs still added up to an unreasonable burden after a year.

By then, the Avatars of Myth could take over the duties previously performed by the mercenaries. Even though it cost a lot of money to set up his own

personal force, the running costs looked a lot more reasonable than paying mercenaries to do the same job.

Mercenaries existed and thrived on fulfilling temporary needs for wealthy clients. Ves personally did not think much about them even as he sold his products to them, but he did not dismiss their worth entirely.

In these dangerous times, he could use all the help he could get.

After taking care of impactful decisions like that, Ves returned to his private workshop floor and resumed his design work.

"All that's left is the exterior and a round of simulations before I can fabricate the first prototype."

The most important part about the exterior was that Ves had to apply the Veltrex armor system without overburdening his mech. As an armor system optimized for knights, it functioned perfectly when the three layers were thick enough to express their unique strengths.

Ves knew that he performed a misdemeanor by applying the same system to a skinny medium rifleman mech, but the nature of the compressed armor still ensured the armor remained strong. Although the thin plates of armor did not live up to their potential, they enormously improved the survivability of his second original design.

"It's not a knight, but it doesn't have to be."

Sometimes, Ves had to thin out the armor plating so much that their effective defense barely exceeded the standard of uncompressed armor. In those cases, Ves substituted the expensive materials with the much cheaper HRF armor system that Ves had last applied to the Marc Antony line of mechs.

He laughed to himself when he drew on the old license he obtained from the System as a reward for completing an early mission. "I never thought I would go back to using this low-quality formula."

If it worked, it worked. Ves ensured that the Veltrex armor system covered most of the essential sections of his design while covering some of the joints and other tricky areas with the much less demanding HRF armor system.

"It's not what I envisioned, but it mostly gets the job done."

The use of two different armor systems led to a slightly unique appearance for his rifleman mech.

Chapter 382 Laser Rifle

If Ves had to describe his second original mech's appearance, then he would describe it as fast. Every curve and line evoked a sense of impatience and flightiness, as if it hated to stand still.

The permanently hunched posture made the mech look like it was permanently on the prowl. Everyone who looked at its appearance would have the misconception that it hunted for a living. Even though Ves had not yet designed a customized laser rifle for the mech, everyone could easily imagine the threat it kept contained within its speedy frame.

This was a mech that hunted other mechs for a living.

His artistic sense prompted him to coat his design with a mottled brown pattern. Although camouflage was pretty much useless in this age, the darker tones and subdued coloration brought a sense of understated class to the premium-priced mech.

Ves added a slightly brighter yellow starburst pattern around the center crystal embedded in the chest. This would draw enemy fire towards the crystal laser propagator, which was very resilient against lasers and most types of thermal weaponry.

The chest also boasted the thickest application of Veltrex armor plating, so even if the enemy missed, his mech would still be fine. Mostly.

The double armor systems contrasted strongly even if Ves tried his best to obscure the different materials. The areas around the joints, neck and anywhere with minimal armor looked noticeably thinner, and adopted a slightly different texture that Ves couldn't remove without using special and expensive coating.

"I can't do anything about the weaknesses inherent with the HRF armor plating. At the very least, I've got most of my design clad in compressed armor. It's going to be very hard for its opponents to aim for those weak points as long as it keeps moving."

The main reason why he couldn't apply thicker armor to the joints was because adding more would cripple his design's mobility. By prioritizing mobility over armor, Ves ensured his mech retained a decent amount of agility and a fair amount of top speed. It also accelerated swiftly as well, which would help with abrupt changes in direction.

After subjecting the design to various simulations, the design met most of its promised performance levels. The only areas of concern seemed to be armor coverage, power supply and heat management.

Every mech design constantly juggled the latter two concerns. Compared to other rifleman mech designs, his current work did not seem so cumbersome.

Power supply formed the most complex issue. Ves planned to employ a laser rifle that drew its power from external battery packs instead of the mech's internal armor. Most often, mechs of the Republic carried spare battery packs inside a small, well-armored backpack module. These widely available backpacks slotted into the Bright Republic's Modular Fitting Standard which Ves had installed on the back of his design.

This separated the weapon's power usage from the power usage of his mech. Some saw it as an advantage, as rifleman mechs could happily drain their external batteries without worrying about draining their mechs dry. Mechs could also carry a lot more energy in total, leading to longer deployments in the field without worrying about resupply.

"On the other hand, bringing along a backpack module adds to the weight and makes the mech vulnerable to attacks from the rear. It's not a pleasant thing if the backpack module explodes along with all of those energetic batteries."

The explosions wouldn't be as violent as the overcharged energy cells on the Glowing Planet, but the force of it could still cripple a mech.

In effect, his choice of relying on external battery packs introduced a vulnerability in his design that contrasted sharply with his design's durable exterior. It was like building an impenetrable fort but leaving the front gates exposed.

Still, those battery packs contained numerous safeguards to prevent such a disaster. Packs rarely exploded these days. Many other rifleman mechs utilized external batteries as well, as many mech pilots hated the limits imposed by relying solely on internal energy cells.

With regards to the mech itself, its power supply should last it a very long while. Due to using the same components as the Blackbeak, his rifleman mech design could go on for ages before needing to resupply its internal energy cells.

"This capability comes at the cost of peak performance, although rifleman mechs don't particularly need it unless they want a quick burst of speed."

In this regard, the weapon type determined the staying power of a rifleman mech. Ballistic rifleman mechs and railgunner mechs generally lasted as long

as they still possessed ammunition. In a pitched battle, it would take less than an hour to run dry.

Due to these limitations, mechs that relied on projectiles generally focused on maximizing their performance in the limited time they remained combat effective. Their peak performance could reach very high levels, although these mechs tend to wear out quickly as well.

"Still, laser rifleman mechs are the kings of attrition."

The ease at which forces could replenish energy cells and batteries made laser rifleman mechs the favored type of mechs in larger battles and longer campaigns. Lasers dealt a lot of damage, but they took time to really take effect. This made them less deadly in short bursts of combat.

Laser rifles also tended to grow hot really fast, so mech pilots had to pace their shots over an extended period of time.

These traits tended to push mechs that used laser weapons into high endurance configurations that lasted for a long time.

Mercenaries tended to prefer the burst lethality offered by ballistic weapons, while armies and larger outfits leaned towards laser weapons for their ease of supply and their staying power.

Naturally, this would only be possible if the weapon did not draw on the mech's internal power. Those mechs ran out of power faster, but offered even higher levels of mobility as they weighed the least out of all rifleman mechs.

"Still, all of these tendencies are merely guidelines. It's not set in stone that all armies only use laser weapons and all mercenaries stick to ballistic weapons."

Ves opted to design a laser rifleman mech in order to provide Melkor with a mech that allowed him to bring out his full strength. The private market still

hungered for rifleman mechs of all kinds, including those designed to wield laser weapons, so Ves did not worry about a lack of demand.

He only needed to convince the market that his mech was worth purchasing over the competition.

"That's what the gimmicks are for. I've already integrated an untested laser crystal in the chest. All that's left is designing the rifle."

He already bought a standard 10-year license for a basic but proven laser rifle design. Its robust and durable qualities along with the lack of frills made it an excellent base for modifications despite its generic and forgettable nature.

One-and-a-half months already went by. Ves planned to finish the laser rifle in two weeks before devoting another month for testing and iteration.

"A lot of time has already gone by. Anything can happen at this point. The sooner I finish this design, the better off the LMC will be once I'm called for other duties."

"Meow."

Floating above his head, Lucky materialized and landed atop his head. The mechanical cat's bone-like exterior made it uncomfortable for Ves to offer his head as a perch.

"Get off my head!"

Ves tried to grab hold of Lucky in order to move him from the top of his head, but Lucky quickly turned intangible once his hands went up.

"Meow."

Lucky excitedly meowed as he avoided the hands and hovered back and forth in the isolated design room.

"I'm sorry for not spending enough time with you, but I really need to get this work done."

"Meow!"

"I know. I'll make it up to you later."

"Meow."

"Yeah, I'll order another batch of yummy minerals soon, however, don't think of getting anything better than junk exotics!"

"Meow meow!"

"You'll bankrupt me if you insist on dining on the best stuff! I don't have a Glowing Planet hiding in my pockets, you know!"

Times like these reminded him that he shouldered an excessive burden. His entire company and hundreds of workers relied on the functioning of a single lead designer. When mech manufacturers grew past the point where they would be called small, they rightly expanded from a single designer to a team of designers.

This wasn't the first time Ves thought about expanding the LMC's retinue of designers. The only problem he faced was one of trust. Ves carried too many secrets, any of which could ruin his life and career if others found them out.

The problem was that if he kept those secrets to himself, others wouldn't be able to understand his design philosophy. Subsequently, their work would never match his exacting standards.

Either Ves had to keep loosen his standard, or he had to resign himself to working by himself.

"After I finish this project, assuming I don't have any other obligations, I should try to cultivate Carlos as the LMC's second designer."

Even though Carlos fell short of what the LMC demanded, Ves still trusted his friend over any other mech designer who would wish to apply to work in his company. His average background and relatively poor talent meant that no one else got to him yet. As his first benefactor, Carlos would trust Ves unconditionally.

"Hm, this is for later. I still have a rifle to finish."

Ves took the existing design of a laser rifle and separated its components. After categorizing each component, Ves designed a laser crystal that would fit inside a rifle before determining which components could be left out.

He puzzled over the issue for several days. He tried to strip out as many components as possible to slim down the rifle. Ves subsequently filled up the void by shrinking the rifle or allocated the extra capacity for larger battery packs and heat sinks.

When Ves previously designed the weapon for the Tainted Sun, he added heat rods to the graser rifle. His current weapon project did not call for the same, as conventional lasers used up much less energy compared to a highly energetic gamma laser.

While Ves had always channeled the spirit of the crystal golem during his design work, it was only once he started work on the laser rifle that it emerged from dormancy.

"You probably know a lot more about these laser crystals than me. If you have anything to suggest, I'm willing to listen."

The crystal golem's second opinion proved to be highly useful in trying to integrate the alien technology in a conventional human weapon design. It helped a lot with integrating the crystal with the remaining weapon components left inside the rifle design.

In the end, Ves cut about forty to fifty percent of the components utilized in the laser rifle design. Ves could have squeezed more performance savings out of the weapon if he went even further, but he was loathe to do so.

Once he started taking out the really essential stuff, the rifle would suffer a large degradation in performance. It was not worth it to take these essential components out.

Actually getting the entire monstrosity to work according to spec was a lot harder than creating a proof-of-concept. Ves needed to maintain the laser rifle's level of performance compared to the base. Even though he possessed some experience in designing a laser rifle, he still lacked in comprehensive experience.

"In the end, I'm not a weapon designer."

While he found it interesting to work on a laser rifle, it only became possible for him to do so due to all of the extra Skills and Sub-Skills he picked up along the way. It would be cumbersome to branch out much further.

If not for the necessity of trying to stand out from the competition, Ves would never waste his time with designing a custom laser rifle.

It took a little longer to finalize the laser rifle. The extra time allowed him to work away the imperfections and increase the efficiency of his weapon until it matched the performance of the original weapon license, but only taking up half the weight and a lot less space.

At this point, Ves was almost ready to fabricate his prototype. He only needed to polish the appearance of his mech and optimize its design for a couple of weeks.

"That reminds me. I still haven't integrated the festive cloud generator in my mech."

Chapter 383 Personal Kingdom

Ves derived a fair amount of the technology used in his design from studying the remains of the crystal builders. His design's appearance and hunched posture faintly echoed the long dead race's appearance. It was clear that the design formed something of an homage to the alien race.

He did not do so because he worshipped the aliens, but because he wanted to please the crystal golem. The spirit inside his head had always nudged his design choices in this direction, and Ves found it best to accommodate its wishes in order to maximize the chances of strengthening the X-Factor of his design.

A thrilling sense of anticipation ran through his body as he thought about the end product. Besides its specs and its technical aspects, his design also excelled in the spiritual sense. It could in fact be one of its strongest point.

Ves couldn't wait to complete his design and experience its X-Factor in full force.

"The Blackbeak may be better put together as a mech, but its X-Factor simply can't compare against this rifleman mech design."

Still, the success of his design in terms of X-Factor depended on the mood of the crystal golem. Ves attempted to please it in any way he could without setting back the performance of his mech.

As for the Festive Cloud Generator, Ves decided to integrate it into the head of his design. He hesitated on the exact appearance of the head, but in the end chose to imitate the crystal builder's strange head shape.

Just like the alien race which inspired this mech, Ves designed the head to be a roughly humanoid shape but without any defined eyes, ears, nostrils or mouths. Instead, he spread a random amount of pin-shaped holes throughout

the front, sides and back of the head. He only filled a couple of them with sensors, leaving the rest of the holes plugged at the very end.

The head looked unsettling, and added to the threatening nature of his rifleman mech. Due to the strange shape of the head, Ves found it to be the perfect outlet for the Festive Cloud Generator. He integrated the module inside the neck and connected it to the holes in the head via dedicated channels.

As for the color of the vapor, Ves decided to use the same understated brownish color as the exterior coating for his mech.

"My Blackbeak either releases black or red phoenix flames, depending on the edition."

In order to add some flair to those who requested it, Ves added in a soul blue shade as an alternative. This would turn the head into some kind of horrific entity that resembled a skeleton that came back to life. Ves thought this would give his design a much better visual impact compared to vapor dyed in earthen tones.

"I don't think many people will go for this option though." Ves considered.

"Rifleman mech pilots aren't eager to call out attention for themselves. If the heads of their mechs suddenly burn in bright blue, they're liable to attract a lot more enemy fire."

The Blackbeak could afford to be focused on by enemy mechs, but his rifleman mech fared poorly if put in the center of attention. Even though both mechs shared the same armor system, one had been designed as a damage sponge and the other had been designed to dish out the damage.

After adding in the cloud generator, Ves essentially finished iterating his design. After this, he would no longer add new features and functionalities to his mech. From now on, he would proceed to optimize his design and smooth

out its flaws until he ended up with a polished rifleman mech that wouldn't shame itself on the battlefield.

"I'm almost finished!" He celebrated to himself, though the only one who heard his words was a bored Lucky who lounged around above his head. "Getting these laser crystals to work is a bit of a pain, but it's well worth the effort."

These gimmicks did not change the game entirely, but they provided a substantial amount of benefits, so long as Ves could actually turn them into reality. That was still in question, as Ves had never fabricated crystals up to this scale.

The hardest part was already over. After completing his rough and polished design, Ves no longer needed to strain his mind on making difficult design choices. All that remained was correcting any inefficiencies that Ves had inadvertently introduced in the design.

Ves proceeded to throw his design in a large number of elaborate simulations. Through the use of complicated mathematical models, Ves crunched the numbers and tested whether the armor coverage contained any hidden weaknesses or how many times the laser rifle could fire in quick succession before it malfunctioned or blew up.

All of this was relatively boring work. Any results the simulations spat out prompted Ves to make minor tweaks such as thickening a plate of armor by a couple of millimeters or shifting one component to the left by a similar margin. This was precision that entailed a lot of repetition.

"The bigger design teams have dedicated analysts to process these simulations."

It was a waste of time for mech designers to concern themselves with this kind of work. While it demanded a high understanding of mathematics and

physics, it also involved relatively little design judgement, so the work didn't have to be done by a mech designer.

"If I work alone, I can finish a decently optimized design in a little over three months. If I have an entire team to back me up, I can either shorten the time by half, or get much more work done in the same amount of time."

The tedium of taking care of every single detail brought a great burden to Ves, and it would only get worse over time. As his designs grew more complex, the amount of details that needed to be taken care of increased as well.

Eventually, it was a lot more efficient to offload the less essential tasks to assistants.

"They don't need to be as good as me in terms of design ability or mathematical understanding. They only have to be good at their assigned task."

Many larger mech companies as well as the state-backed militaries relied on the works of design teams. The work of a single person always took longer to complete. The lack of involvement of others also made the mechs designed by a single person very insular in nature.

This meant that such mechs possessed very pronounced strengths and weaknesses. This didn't sound so bad, but sometimes a mech designer was so myopic that he overlooked a critical weakness in his design that would instantly plummet its value once revealed.

Ves was not so conceited to think he could keep track of everything, including the things he didn't know.

"It seems like it's inevitable for the LMC to become more professional."

Ves would always treat the LMC as his own personal kingdom. He merely considered the act of expanding his design team akin to hiring a couple of

court wizards. As long as Ves kept a tight leash on them, they would be unable to pose a threat to him and his kingdom.

Still, just because he resolved to create a design team didn't mean he could gather a number of people with the snap of his finger.

"Hiring a number of competent assistants is easier than done. The best people are claimed by the major players when they are a long way from graduation."

He needed to cultivate talent from the ranks. In that regard, calling any of his employees talented would be stretching it. The only way he could cut short the arduously long training process was to utilize the advantages of the System.

"Before I design my third mech, I better stuff Carlos with a bunch of Intelligence Attribute Candies and see what happens."

Ves doubted that Carlos possessed more intelligence than the average among humans. If his Intelligence Attribute happened to have shot up straight to 2.0, that was a different story entirely. His friend would experience a sea of change, and would be able to digest every textbook that Ves had gathered in a matter of days.

While Ves daydreamed about cultivating Carlos, an alarm suddenly interrupted his thoughts. A red light flashed for several seconds, long enough for the seriousness of it to set in. Ves forcefully halted his isolation and raced towards the terminal that connected to the outside world. He quickly called up Jake.

"What's going on outside?"

"It's bad. The Vesians have come!"

That was all Ves needed to know. His jaw dropped and his heart skipped a beat. Even though he made a lot of preparations for their possible arrival, Ves secretly hoped they never decided to come to the Cloudy Curtain System.

Out of all the rural systems around Bentheim, Cloudy Curtain was one of the poorest and least developed economies in the neighborhood. Despite the rising importance of the LMC to the planet, agriculture still remained the dominant export of this planet.

Even if the Vesians wanted to starve Bentheim of their food, the most a couple of mechs could do was burn some fields and destroy some processing plants. It would be impossible for an entire legion to scour the entire planet of all crops within a month.

And when they left, the farming consortiums could simply clean up the wreckage and plant another batch of crops.

No, the Vesians hadn't come to raid some farms. Their goal should be more than clear. Ves looked grimly at Jake's projection. "They're coming for us, aren't they?"

"Sanyal-Ablin thinks that's likely the case. The 3rd Imodris Legion is out in force and they're simultaneously hitting over twenty different planets at once. All of the targeted planets in question are hosting some kind of industry related to mechs or ships."

In other words, the Vesians definitely targeted his Mech Nursery.

"How many mechs are they bringing along?"

"If you take into account the historical patterns as well as their usual modus operandi, they're likely bringing in one company of spaceborn mechs and two companies of landbound mechs. Mind you, these are full strength companies. They can't compare against the mechs and people employed by the private sector."

Leaving out the spaceborn mechs, Cloudy Curtain had to withstand the fury of more than eighty military-spec mechs.

"Can the Mech Nursery withstand such a force?"

"It's doubtful." Jake replied, revealing his own apprehension at the nearing fleet of combat carriers. "The defenses of the Mech Nursery can't even withstand a single company of Legion mechs. Two companies can absolutely overrun our base, although that doesn't take into account our mobile defenses."

The Mech Nursery still possessed a way to survive the Vesian fury by relying on their allied mechs.

"Talk to me about our mech disposition."

"We've just discovered the Vesians, so it's not clear how many mechs we can call up. Right now, Sanyal-Ablin has promised twenty-four high-quality mechs to our defense. These are top-of-the-line third-class mechs, so they'll be able to punch above their weight against the Vesians."

Ves nodded in understanding. Sanyal-Ablin Security Services was a subsidiary of the Konsu Clan. As a partner of a second-rate state, the Konsu Clan was more than capable of maintaining such an expensive force of mechs in the standard of third-rate states.

Still, even with the LMC's current earning levels, they could ill afford to expand their already hefty contract with Sanyal-Ablin. They couldn't rely on more than twenty-four mechs from the security company to defend their manufacturing complex.

"As for the Avatars of Myth, you should know more about them than me, seeing that they're under your sole command. As far as I'm aware of, your cousin Melkor has been drilling them non-stop in their current service mechs.

Although they only bring nine mechs to the table if you include your cousin, their capabilities should be on par with the average Vesian squad."

That brought their side to a third of the amount of mechs the Vesians would bring to bear. They were still horribly outnumbered, but if they fought cleverly, they still stood a chance of repelling the raiding force.

"What about Walter's Whalers? Have they gotten in touch yet?"

"They have, but..." Jake hesitated a little. "They aren't exactly eager to come to blows with the Vesians. They'll do their part for sure, if only to meet their obligations, but we can't force them to hold their ground."

"That's a problem." Ves frowned deeply. If the Whalers chickened out, where did that leave him? "How about the mercenaries? Please tell me they're prepared to face the Vesians."

Chapter 384 Black Mark

"About that..." Jake sounded like he swallowed a sour lemon. "I think it's best to switch you over to Melkor. He's been coordinating the Mech Nursery's defenses."

Ves waited for the comm channel to switch to Melkor.

"Ves? I've been meaning to speak to you."

"I just heard the short version. Tell me about the readiness of the mercenaries. Who did you hire and what kind of issues do they have?"

Melkor sighed on the other side of the channel. "It's complicated. First, do you know what mercenaries do during times of war?"

"Some of them join the Mech Corps or get conscripted by them, right?"

"Yes, and it's always the best of them that get snapped up one way or another. Usually, mercenaries prize their freedom and identity, so the Mech

Corps usually contracts them to defend less important places that still need to be protected. So right off the bat, the best mercenaries have disappeared."

"Leaving the hiring market with the non-elites and the small to medium-sized mercenary corps who aren't worthy of notice." Ves added onto Melkor's explanation. He could predict where his cousin was going with this story from his own understanding of how the market worked. "Since this is a time of war, plenty of companies are shivering in their pants. They can't bolster their security forces fast enough, so they've immediately hired the leftovers who are still worth a damn."

The latest war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom already raged on for a couple of months. The most farsighted companies already made their moves long ago.

"When you tasked us some time ago to hire some mercenaries as well, the outfits that were still available at that time are like the last kids you'd pick to join your team. They all come with various amounts of baggage. The only good thing about them is that they know their records look bad, so they've all been setting reasonable prices."

"Did you hire a cheap group then?"

"Not exactly." Melkor shook his head. "Those guys are liable to cut and run when the going gets tough. I'm not stupid enough to put my faith on those types. Besides, none of these cowards indicated that they wanted to take on an assignment that would force them to fight directly against the Vesian frontline forces."

Ves snorted. "Good luck with that. I don't think those mercenaries can afford to be picky. They'll probably go bankrupt very soon."

"It's better to be bankrupt than dead." Melkor shrugged. "In any case, there aren't that many mercenary corps who are willing to accept a high-risk

defense assignment, which is what's applicable to our situation. I've had to spend days negotiating with various outfits available for hire."

"And the result?"

"Well, after discussing it with the LMC's upper management, we've settled on a medium-sized group called the Oodis Mudriders."

"Charming name." The name of the outfit alone did not inspire much confidence in Ves.

"The Mudriders specialize in extended patrols, wilderness reconnaissance and other missions of that nature. They're really good at what they do, so I've decided to contract them even if they don't specialize in defense."

His cousin must have a good reason to do so. "Then what's the problem with the Mudriders?"

"There's no way in putting it gently, so I'll just say it. The Mudriders have a black mark on their record."

Ves instantly turned serious. "Really? And you hired them anyway?"

What was a black mark? In the mercenary circles, the Mercenary Association kept track of each mercenary outfit's performance and whether they fulfilled their obligations. They were much like the Mech Trade Association in that regard, though they did not wield any real power or maintained their own defense force. In short, they acted solely as neutral arbiters.

In their record-keeping, they frequently had to deal with mercenaries that failed to do their jobs for some reason or another. The MA would often be called to investigate the circumstances if the mercenaries and their employers failed to come to an agreement. Either the mercenaries would be acquitted, or they'd receive a red or black mark on their records.

A red mark signified a warning sign. It meant that the mercenary corps in question had fudged their job somehow. These marks instantly lowered the valuation of the corps, but fortunately for them the MA offered plenty of options to redeem themselves, usually through demonstrating good behavior in the next handful of missions.

It was a different case with a black mark. The mercenary corps had to do a completely unforgivable act in order to acquire a black mark. This usually entailed actions short of becoming a full pirate, but still looked pretty bad. Most often, this consisted of destroying something that they'd been assigned to protect, fleeing too early in battle, or getting caught doing something wildly illegal.

Many mercenary corps gave up on the spot once they received a black mark. Sadly, the mech pilots wouldn't be able to get away with it either, as the black mark persisted in their personal records as well. Many pilots therefore chose to retire from the mercenary business entirely.

To those who for some reason or another desperately wanted to stay in the business, the MA offered a couple of ways out. The most popular one would be to redeem themselves through completing a number of missions with exemplary behavior.

Unlike with red marks though, the mercenaries wouldn't be able to remove their black marks with a string of boring and safe guard or patrol duties in the middle of nowhere. They specifically had to demonstrate their valor through completing high-risk assignments.

"This is the first high-risk assignment for the Mudriders." Melkor continued to explain. "They received their black marks at the outbreak of the war when they were contracted to defend a lucrative natural preserve planet. For some reason, they did not prepare for the war and got caught with their pants down

when a deep-ranging raiding party entered the system. You can guess what happened next."

These Mudriders already sounded like idiots to Ves. Who didn't know that a war was imminent back then? "Okay, so their peacetime contract obliged them to defend the operations on the natural preserve, but they never actually expected to face the fangs of the Mech Legion. Did they run immediately or did they at least pretend to put up a fight?"

"It's actually both. They used to be a fairly large mercenary corps with over seventy mechs. Half of them mutinied against the mercenary commander and fled the system just hours after the arrival of the Vesians. The other half became so demoralized that even if the commander wanted to make a stand, the circumstances forced him to pull back as well, hence the black mark."

While Ves felt a lot of sympathy for the mercenary commander, that did not mean he appreciated the commander's leadership abilities. "Right, and now we're the ones they're tasked with defending. How many mechs do they have?"

"There's only twenty-four left. The good thing is that most of them are advanced mechs. The Mudriders who piloted the frontline mechs didn't hold much loyalty to the corps and don't possess strong wills. What's left are the true core of the Mudriders."

Twenty-four mechs, most of them on par with the mechs of the Avatars of Myth. That sounded a bit better. This brought the defending mechs to at least half the strength of what the Vesians might bring to bear.

It was still short of insuring victory, but Ves could not afford to be picky at the moment.

Melkor proceeded to tell Ves a few other details about the Mudriders that he should know before suggesting that he should meet with the mercenary commander in person.

"The Mudriders are based in the mech stables next to ours. You should really speak with the commander and try to convince him that the Mech Nursery can hold as long as they are committed to the fight."

Ves nodded. He knew how important it was to prop up the mercenaries after suffering an enormous spout of bad luck. "I'll go do that."

He cut the comm channel and proceeded to leave the underground portion of the Mech Nursery with Lucky in tow.

As he briefly glanced at the various floor, he noticed that the manufacturing complex had gone into full crisis mode.

His people halted every non-essential operation such as fabricating mechs and began to stow away every loose component and material laying around in the open.

Under the leadership of Chief Cyril, the mech technicians also started to tidy up the production lines and began to wrap them up with makeshift armor plating in order to protect them against collateral damage.

Out of everything in the Mech Nursery, the LMC could not afford to lose its three production lines. As the most valuable physical assets of his company, the Vesian raiding force would definitely do their utmost to pound the expensive machines into scrap.

Once he reached the surface, he saw that most of the office buildings had actually been retracted underneath the ground. While that didn't guarantee they would escape unscathed, it at least made them less of an obvious target.

As for the mech stables, for various reasons these structures couldn't be moved, but their sturdy construction could take a fair amount of blows before they succumbed. Ves and Lucky moved to the largest structure which had been assigned to the Oodis Mudriders.

Upon reaching the entrance, the Mudriders must have gotten prior word of his arrival because their mech pilots and support personnel all stood at attention in front.

Ves got the sense that a fair amount of pilots used to serve in the Mech Corps. It stood to reason that they stuck to the Mudriders when everyone else left the group.

An older man stood in front and approached Ves. "Welcome to the Oodis Mudriders. I am Commander Merin Husaan, the man in charge of these bunch. Isn't that right?!"

The Mudriders shouted in unison. The discipline of those who remained still appeared to be strong. The display quietly allayed some of the concerns that Ves still held. At least the Mudriders hadn't been left with the dregs.

Once Commander Husaan dismissed his men and women, he led Ves to an office that he appropriated for his use. "I appreciate you coming to pay us a visit. You don't seem like the corporate types who let their underlings do all of the work."

How was Ves supposed to respond to such a remark? "Your Mudriders form a vital part of our defense, so I can't afford to remain hands off. Now, I'm aware of your outfit's recent history. It doesn't look good."

Husaan let out a deprecating smile. "It is not a secret that my Mudriders are much-diminished. In truth, we've had it too easy in the last decade. We've expanded too fast and brought in strangers to fight alongside us. We trusted

them to watch our hides, but at the critical moment, they turned their own backs to us and left."

"Can you guarantee that it won't happen again? We truly need your commitment to this coming fight."

"I will stake my mercenary honor on this task. I would rather die than to see the mercenary corps that I've built out of my own flesh and tears dissolve due to another act of dishonor!"

That sounded great, but Commander Husaan did not speak for his entire crew. Even though his men showed an encouraging display of unity, who knew if any of them held second thoughts? Once a single mech pilot ran away, his departure might lead to a cascade of defections, especially in the heat of battle.

Ves crossed his arms. "Actions speak louder than words. I'll reserve my judgement until the Vesians actually come."

"That's fair." Husaan nodded. "All I can tell you is that we'll do our best to defend these premises, but if you want to employ us at our best, then you must grant us the autonomy to operate according to our strengths."

"What does that mean?"

"I've been arguing with the man you've assigned to coordinate your defenses, and we have a disagreement on how my Mudriders should be employed."

"And you haven't resolved your argument?"

"No." The robust mercenary commander shook his head. "We're trained to fight on the run. We are a skirmishing force, not a frontline unit. Standing behind the walls and letting the enemy come to us isn't what we do."

It turned out that Commander Husaan wanted the Mudriders to be deployed outside the Mech Nursery. Instead of defending the walls, the Mudriders

would harass the incoming raiding force from the flanks and force them to split up their focus.

The idea sounded good, but the problem was that nothing held the Mudriders back from running away if they chose to do so.

Ves understood why Melkor was hesitant in granting them so much leeway. They already possessed one black mark in their record.

"Let me speak to my cousin about it before I make a decision."

Chapter 385 Defense Plans

After leaving the mech stables occupied by the Mudriders, Ves payed a visit to the facility that held the Avatars of Myth.

Melkor already used the budget provided by Ves to good use. The mech stables looked like a bunker that could withstand a lot more punishment than the one he visited before. It had also been built on top of a collapsible tunnel that led to an underground network.

"Ves." Melkor greeted him as he arrived. "I believe you have met the Oodis Mudriders?"

"They look like they have something to prove."

"You can't trust what you see. They purposely put their best foot forward." Melkor admonished him as he led him past the mechs of his own personal force.

They all looked decent, but the two gold label Blackbeaks took the crown. The two offensive knights radiated a subtle flavor that spoke of bloodthirst and anticipation. Ves mentally nodded in satisfaction. Their X-Factor should enhance the two mechs by a small but noticeable margin.

After finishing the small tour, Melkor led Ves to an underground command center of some sorts. A dozen or so new hires staffed the various workstations

in the highly secure chamber. Ves recognized them as part of his own personal force due to the temporary uniforms they wore that matched Melkor's own.

His cousin seemed to have opted for a sober black uniform of stiff high-quality fabric along with touches of blue. The uniform gave those who wore them a lot of stature, and Ves approved of the look. Perhaps he would instruct Melkor to turn permanent.

"This is our first command center. Here, we will coordinate our surface defense. There are other command centers underground, but it's not necessary to use them yet. The chances that the Vesians are bringing tunneling machines are very low."

In the middle of the command center hovered a projection of the star system and the Mech Nursery's vicinity.

"From our latest observations, the Vesian combat carriers are making swift progress to the inner system. They'll arrive in orbit in about eleven hours. That's very short, and we don't have enough time to bolster our defenses."

Ves studied the space plot and traced the trajectory of the Vesian ships. "Is there any way to threaten their ships?"

"No. I've already made some inquiries and it's impossible for us to damage them. They're very well-guarded by an entire company of spaceborn mechs. As you know, the Mech Corps isn't maintaining any garrisons in this star system. Instead, the job of defending the system and planet is left to Walter's Whalers."

"I see."

Even with their recent windfalls, it took time for the Whalers to train competent mech pilots and acquire new mechs. This raid happened way too soon for the

Whalers to put a strong resistance. Ves did not forget that they lost a lot of mech pilots in the Glowing Planet campaign.

Ves also had a first-hand look at how they operated back then. Typical for gangs, battles in space was not their strong suit. They much preferred to operate on land, as that was more intuitive and required less brain power to understand.

In order to excel in space like a true spaceborn fighting force, the Whalers would need to hire a lot of ship captains and mech officers who understood orbital mechanics and other highly technical knowledge.

Let alone orbital mechanics, Ves doubted that the average gang member learned how to count past ten.

"Okay, it's hopeless to contest the Vesians in space, but the Whalers are much better off on the ground, right?"

Melkor nodded. "That's one thing that's gone right. Dietrich has been in touch with us and they've promised to defend Freslin and the Mech Nursery, depending on where the Vesians planned to strike. However, he did warn us that while the mechs are much better than what they used to have, the mech pilots are mostly green and untested. They won't be able to stand their ground in a pitched battle."

That meant instead of relying on the Whalers to be the main force that blunted the Vesian spearhead, they could only be employed to perform less critical roles.

Ves let out a grunt in frustration. "Seems like everyone is doing their best to shirk responsibility for the most arduous task. Will Sanyal-Ablin do their jobs at least?"

"They've informed me that they are committed to fulfill their contracts, and for once, I believe them. The credibility of SASS as a whole is on the line here."

That meant that the Mech Nursery could at least depend on a core of twenty-four very capable mechs to hold the line. At least the LMC got their money's worth in that regard.

The defense picture started to become clear to Ves. He looked at the map that showed the Mech Nursery and its surroundings. Ves chose to plant the highly defensible manufacturing complex in a complex forest environment tens of kilometers away from Freslin.

This was near enough for his employees to live in the second-largest city of Cloudy Curtain and commute to the Mech Nursery every day. It was also far enough away from the city that attack on the Mech Nursery would not pull in innocent bystanders.

Melkor swiped his finger at the star-shaped walls of the Mech Nursery. "The Vesians have come to raid our location, so they won't be wasting time on whittling us down. Standard Vesian doctrine calls for concentrating their force and breaching our defense line in a single powerful push. This strategy works well enough against most company-own premises."

Inside the complex, Sanyal-Ablin's mechs and weapon emplacements formed a stiff defense, especially against missiles and aerial threats.

"We've got a lot of turrets."

"Don't depend on them to repel two entire companies of Vesian mechs. They're mostly employed for anti-air duty. If the Vesians are stupid enough to fly a mech over our heads, every turret will be able to draw a bead on such an exposed target."

It was a little more problematic for the turrets to target landbound mechs. In addition, they made for very obvious targets. Their complete lack of mobility easily turned them into punching bags for agile mechs that could dodge the incoming turret fire.

"Well, the Vesians won't drop down on top of us at the very least." Ves consoled himself. "So if I'm reading this map correctly, the SASS mechs will hold the wall while the Whaler reinforcements will wait at the outskirts of Freslin?"

"That's correct. The Whalers are obliged to defend their citizens first in case the Vesians split. If the raiding force doesn't decide to hit Freslin, then the Whaler mechs will be departing in our direction and hit the Vesians from the flanks."

That sounded identical to what the Oodis Mudriders requested. The difference was that Ves knew that the quality of the mech pilots from the Whalers precluded them from being employed in the most difficult position.

"I see. That's why you're so adamant that the Oodis Mudriders join the Sanyal-Ablin mechs on the walls. We don't have too many front-facing resistance otherwise."

Melkor nodded his head but let out a breath in concern. "Really Ves, you could have spent more time and resources on bolstering your defences. Rushing the construction of the Mech Nursery helped a lot, but the base builders haven't completely finished building all of the systems that makes this complex defensible."

"Well, I can't help the timing of the 3rd Imodris Legion. Who is leading that unit?"

"A descendant of the Duchess of Imodris named Lady Amalia. She's young and way down the line of suggestion, so she's certainly set out to make a name for herself."

That sounded really bad for Cloudy Curtain and the rest of the Bentheim region. Two types of leaders typically took charge of the Vesian legions. The most common type would be career officers, who mostly inherited the position

from their parents. They were much like the Larkinsons in that they possessed a strong military heritage.

It was the other type of leader that posed a huge threat to the LMC. Mech legions led by ambitious heirs often did whatever it took to earn military merits. At the highest level of non-royal nobility, the fight to inherit a dukedom often led to lots of tears.

"Okay, if it's someone like Lady Amalia, then we can expect the Vesian raiding force won't be cowed by our defenses." Ves recalled the few instances where he witnessed the Vesians in battle.

One particular moment stood out. It was when the fleets of the Mech Legion and Mech Corps temporary banded together to escape the Glowing Planet. Once they shook off the pirates, their fleeting reticence quickly dissolved, and both sides started slinging punches at each other without any regard for caution.

Melkor laid down the most pressing issue. "Twenty-four mechs from Sanyal-Ablin will hold the walls. The squad of mechs under my command will stay back as a reserve. The thirty mechs sent by the Whalers will approach the Vesians from the direction of Freslin once they've committed to the assault."

That amounted to sixty-three mechs, which sounded deceptively impressive. In truth, Ves would be a fool to assume they would all be completely willing to commit to the fight.

The Whaler mechs especially formed the most unstable element. They could only be used as a distraction at best.

The Vesians definitely wouldn't expose any weaknesses for them to exploit. While their nobles often fought among themselves, their individual unit cohesion was extremely high.

Therefore, the lynchpin of the defense of the Mech Nursery rested on the role of the Oodis Mudriders.

"Will the Oodis Mudriders really be useful if they stand the line?"

"Definitely. Don't mistake them for being only good for skirmishing maneuvers. A mercenary corps of that caliber won't leave any gaps in the training of their mech pilots. Besides, the Mech Nursery's premises are large enough that they can still run around as much as they want to inside our defensive perimeter."

"Alright, so they'll definitely be useful if they defend the Mech Nursery from the inside. But won't they be more effective if we accept Commander Husaan's request to let them range outside the perimeter?"

Melkor conceded that point. "That's true, but this isn't a situation where everyone gets what they want. The Vesians are upon us in less than half a standard day, and we only have so many mechs to go around. You have to realize that the Vesians will attempt to breach the walls in a single go with all they got. It's vitally important we contain that initial push, and that requires a lot more than the twenty-four mechs than what Sanyal-Ablin is offering."

"Well, we've also got the Avatars of Myth."

"Ves, don't tell me what to do." Melkor curtly rebuked Ves. "Even though the Vesians are likely to employ the direct approach, there's always the chance they'll sneak around or pull off something else. A reserve is always needed to provide against contingencies, and they also need to be some of our best and most reliable people. No one else but my Avatars can fulfill this role."

This left a fairly bleak picture for the Mech Nursery's defense. Melkor truly convinced him of the necessity to leash the Mudriders to the walls.

Commander Husaan and the rest of the mercenaries wouldn't be glad to hear that, but the mercenary contract they signed with the LMC didn't leave them many options for refusal.

"Seeing as you've failed to convince them, I guess I'll go ahead and talk to Commander Husaan myself." Ves replied and turned to leave the command center. "Do you have any suggestions on how to handle the Mudriders?"

"They're a disgraced mercenary corps. Those who remained care a lot about their own honor. As career mercenaries, the thing they hate the most is retiring in ignomy with a permanent black mark on their records. Maybe you can use their honor against them. I'm not the most silver-tongued person, so I haven't been able to do that myself. I hope you have better luck."

"Hah." Ves smirked. "As if I'm any better. It's more like my mouth is made of wood."

Chapter 386 Divided Opinions

The appearance of a Vesian raiding force into the quiet star system of Cloudy Curtain sparked an enormous panic. The only inhabited planet of the system turned into a beehive of activity.

With a population of less than twenty million, the people of Cloudy Curtain never really paid attention to what went on in the stars.

The planet was content to ignore the galaxy, and the galaxy in turn left it alone. Its status as an agricultural backwater always caused others to overlook Cloudy Curtain as a place of importance. In the previous wars between the Republic and the Kingdom, the aggressive Vesians always seemed to overlook this tiny planet in favor of the much more attention-grabbing Bentheim System.

In any case, if the Vesians ever succeeded in conquering the Bentheim System, the peripheral star systems around this core location would automatically fall in the Vesian hands without another shot.

Therefore, the sudden appearance of the Republic's eternal boogeymen in the Cloudy Curtain System of all places caused an enormous ripple effect among

the populace. Many sleepy citizens didn't even know what to do in the event of an emergency, which was something unthinkable in a crisis-ridden place like Bentheim.

With millions of people running around like headless chickens, a number of influential organizations forcefully took charge.

The Planetary Assembly was not among them. During a crisis of life and death, no one paid attention to the local politicians. In recent times, the ruling coalition had taken a large hit in popularity. Their stranglehold on local politics was a thing of the past.

Nevertheless, The Greens and the White Doves never relented in their public criticism of the Pioneers, the LMC and Ves. The White Doves in particular rightfully argued that they had warned the people for years.

"I told you so! What was Mr. Larkinson thinking for setting up a giant mech plant on our peaceful planet?!"

"Say NO to mechs! Tell the LMC to blow up their entire factory before the Vesians land! Don't give them a reason to lay waste to our cities!"

"The war has nothing to do with us! Brighter, Vesian, I don't care what I call myself. Just leave us alone!"

"The immigration authorities lied to us! I thought this was one of the safest planets in the Komodo Star Sector. I wanted a quiet retirement, not a first-class seat to a mech battle!"

Most of these voices came from the capital planet of Orinoco, which in recent times became a bulwark for the previous status quo. The businesses and influential people who congregated there purposefully amplified the voices of the discontent.

On the other side of the planet, Freslin, which had become a lively city of mech enthusiasts, fought back with their own words.

"You fricking cowards! The Republic should have you shot for your treasonous words!"

"News flash, dumbasses, mechs are prevalent in every corner in the galaxy! No matter how hard you try to bury your head in the sands, there's no way you can avoid bumping into mechs!"

"Millions of Republican mech pilots have fought and bled to preserve your freedom, and you want us to roll over and destroy our own mech builders on our own accord? You should be ashamed of yourselves!"

"I don't know about you, but the Vesians are the enemy, not one of our own! If you're so eager to lend them a hand, then go tumble out of the Bright Republic this instant!"

The raucous debate grew superheated even as the Vesian combat carriers neared the divided planet.

For some reason, the Republican Commissioner remained mum and did not face the public in order to advocate for calm and solidarity. With the critical absence of the only figure on the planet that could unite both sides, the contradictions between the two sides widened to an extreme.

In the middle of this debate, the response of Walter's Whalers revealed their stance on this issue. As the only organization on the planet with a substantial amount of mechs, they had a responsibility to defend the citizens against unbridled Vesian slaughter.

According to the social compact between the Republic and the gangs, the latter would only be obligated to fight if the Vesians ran out of control and unscrupulously harmed civilian targets.

As a mech manufacturer, the LMC fell outside of this consideration, as every business of this nature was by definition a military target. This meant that nothing forced the Whalers to defend the LMC's new partially underground megacomplex.

However, Walter himself released a statement professing friendship and support to the local mech company. They decreased the amount of mechs stationed around Orinoco, stating somewhat correctly that Orinoco did not hold anything worth destroying by the Vesians.

Naturally, all of the pampered politicians and magnates in Orinoco howled loudly at the Whalers, to no avail. The Whalers operated mostly outside the jurisdiction of the local government, so they had absolutely no reason to listen to the instructions of a bunch of self-absorbed fat cats.

Along with the Whalers, the Pioneers also provided a crucial amount of leadership and support in these trying times. They mobilized thousands of volunteers to reassure the inhabitants of Freslin and stem the outbreak of panic and hysteria.

"Hold together, people! We are not alone! Hold yourself together and don't forget that we are part of the Republic!"

Once the initial confusion subsided, the citizens of Cloudy Curtain began to make their preparations. Several emergency services came together and formed coordinated response plans.

They also wiped the dust from the almost-forgotten emergency shelters that had been built just after the founding of the planet. Even though many of the systems had rusted away or fallen into disrepair, the emergency services brought them back to minimal functionality and opened them up to the public to take shelter.

Many more inspiring moments occurred in the hours leading up to the Vesian arrival. Doom mingled with hope in equal measure as Cloudy Curtain faced its first true test against adversity in centuries.

At ground zero of this event, Ves just stepped out of the bunker and thought of something great. He abruptly turned his body and regarded a floating Lucky with a gleam in his eyes.

"Hey Lucky, you can turn intangible whenever you want, right?"

"Meow?"

"So why not do me a favor and wipe out the raiding force? You can pass straight into their cockpits and kill the vulnerable pilots with ease!"

"Meow! Meow!"

Lucky very avidly shook his head, which caused Ves to frown. What was the problem? The plan sounded perfect!

"You can't, or you won't?"

"Meeow!"

"Why can't you do what I just described? What's limiting you?"

"Meow meow meow!"

It was times like these that Ves wished the gem cat came with a human vocalizer. Many artificial pets possessed the ability to speak in a human language. It helped a lot with kids. However, Lucky somehow lacked this function. Ves spent over five minutes trying to communicate with his pet.

"So not only does it take a lot of energy to pass through mech armor, you can't maintain your intangible state if subjected to extreme amounts of kinetic or thermal energy?"

"Meooooow!"

Ves always thought that Lucky could maintain his intangible state without limits, but even that turned out to be too good to be true. Lucky always expended a certain amount of energy and processing power to maintain the state. Both of them spiked whenever the cat faced a major disturbance, such as getting shot at by projectiles and lasers.

This wouldn't be too bad if Lucky got shot at by infantry weapons. Guns of that scale only led to minor stress.

Mech-scaled weapons were a different matter entirely. They unleashed so much energy that Lucky could only last a few seconds if targeted directly by such an awesome amount of firepower.

Once Ves found out about these limitations, he changed his mind about pushing Lucky in a direct combat role. Instead, he wanted Lucky to stick close to him until the Vesians arrived.

"After they begin their attack, try and see if you can sneak inside a vulnerable mech in the periphery and pick off its pilot."

"Meow meow meow!"

Lucky made it clear that it took a lot of effort to do such a thing, as Lucky found it very difficult to pass through the armor and working systems of an active mech. He could only take care of three or four mechs in this manner before needing replenishment.

"Three or four mechs are enough. We can use all the help we can get."

Besides Lucky, Ves also planned to go into action once the Vesians breached the walls and attempted to smash through the tunnels that led to the underground floors. With a clever application of his Full Stealth augment, he might be able to unleash a full-powered laser beam from the Amastendira.

"It's better if Melkor wields the Amestendira, but he can do more with a mech than with a pistol."

Ves did not trust any of the security officers who worked for Sanyal-Ablin with the precious laser pistol. Thus, for lack of a better alternative, he planned to keep hold of the Amastendira and use it himself if he found the right opportunity.

The recent shooting practice he got when he played the lottery at the crystal city refined his handling of the pistol. Though his marksmanship could not be compared with a professional soldier, he could at least shoot straight at a stationary target or a giant moving mech.

After taking stock of his own situation, Ves resumed his journey towards the Mudriders. When he arrived at their mech stables, Commander Husaan took him aside again and looked at him with a hopeful expression.

Ves did not have good news for him. "Melkor has apprised me of the situation. While I'm not an expert in these matters, I trust his judgement. We need more mechs at the front. If your mechs can bolster the mechs of Sanyal-Ablin, we can blunt the Vesian charge and force them to reconsider the merits of attacking the Mech Nursery."

"This is a gross misuse of the Mudriders!" Husaan instantly protested. "Let us range outside, and I'll promise you that you won't regret it!"

Unspoken in the mercenary commander's words was that if Ves insisted otherwise, that he might regret his decision. Ves took note of the commander's tone but remained firm.

"You signed a defense contract with us. I skimmed over it along the way and it states quite clearly that while you have operational command over your forces, you still have to deploy them according to the needs of your employer.

Now, as your employer, I'm telling you that you are needed at the walls, not away from them. I won't brook any further argument on this issue."

Although Commander Husaan was at least twice as old as Ves and experienced countless of conflicts, he still felt a sliver of a threat from the mech designer's tone. The mercenary leader turned grim.

"The contract also states that the Mudriders still reserve the right to refuse any unlawful or suicidal orders."

"Don't kid yourself. This isn't a suicidal act. We aren't facing the full might of the 3rd Imodris Legion! They just threw two companies of mechs at us as an afterthought. Their raid on our facility is just an afterthought! As long as you work together with us, I'm sure we can succeed in fending off the Vesians!"

"We can't!" Husaan shouted back at Ves. "The Mudriders have been through hell and back, and we've changed beyond recognition! One more trip back to hell will break our men. I'm not sure there will be anything left of the Mudriders if I announce your plan to my mech pilots."

Ves stood silently in front of the mercenary commander with a grim expression. He could not afford any further compromises. Not when it concerned the well-being of his company.

"Are you a mercenary or a crybaby? I'm not so sure, because you sound a lot like the latter."

Commander Husaan looked indignant at Ves. He tightly gripped his fists. The two fell into an impasse. The fate of the LMC and the Oodis Mudriders both rested on who yielded first.

Chapter 387 Three Mechs

The two argued back and forth but they largely repeated the same arguments. Ves hadn't been able to come up with a compelling argument to convince the

Mudriders to partake in the defense with all their heart, so Ves simply chose to be firm and unyielding.

Certainly, he felt a little bad about the Oodis Mudriders, but compared to his own benefits, why should he care about the well-being of some random mercenaries?

"Are you not a mercenary?" Ves pressed, having just reminded himself of Melkor's advice. "Do you still wish for the Oodis Mudriders to exist after this assignment? If the Mech Nursery falls, your mercenary corps is ruined. You'll lose every opportunity to clear your records of your black marks."

Commander Husaan frowned. "Is the alternative any better? You're throwing us to the meat grinder!"

"That's because you signed up for this job! You wanted to prove your valor, right? Then do so! Proving your courage means you should stand up to adversity when everyone else tells you to run away! It's disgraceful of you to hear you try so hard to shirk your duty. Do you need a reminder on what a high-risk assignment entails? It's not a walk in the park, for heaven's sake!"

"Even if you're right, you are going too far with this! You are not our commanding officer. Your word isn't law! Don't think that I won't dare to pull my forces out of this deathtrap of a complex if I think you're about to throw away our lives!"

"If the Mech Corps hears about your words, they'll scoff at them. The nature of combat doesn't allow us the privilege of choosing our battles. The Vesians are spoiling for a fight. So what? Countless pilots of the Mech Corps are doing their duties right now without any complaint! If they can step up, why don't you?"

"That's because the Mech Corps enjoy the best training and the best equipment! Their mechs are all top-notch machines while my Mudriders are working with five to ten year old mechs!"

"Boohoo. I've seen your mechs. You can't fool a mech designer's eyes. Your mech models are all robust designs. They've got plenty of life in them yet!"

"And we'll risk losing most of them before the end of the week if we cash head-on against the Mech legion!"

Obviously, Ves did not manage to shake Commander Husaan's position. After a brief moment of silence, Ves decided to resort to the carrot rather than the stick.

"If the Mudriders do this for my, I won't skimp on the rewards."

"We're already entitled to the highest class of hazard pay as well as compensation for any damage we might incur. Still, no matter how much money you throw at us, it won't make the dead come back to life."

"I'm not talking about more money. How about receiving a couple of exclusive mechs in exchange?"

"Are you kidding me?" Husaan began to turn his back to Ves.

"Wait a minute! These aren't your average mechs!" Ves quickly followed up on his statement. "You must have heard about the LMC and its latest model, right? The Blackbeak's characteristics fits perfectly with the Mudriders. It's mobile, resilient and doesn't require frequent resupply. I'll personally fabricate two top-tier gold label Blackbeaks for your mercenary corps."

Although it sounded ridiculous that Ves attempted to bribe Husaan with a couple of mechs, the mercenary commander couldn't help but halt in his tracks. He knew about the renown of the Blackbeaks. They were excellent

mech models and their quality surpassed the machines that the Mudriders currently employed.

Two mechs might not sound like much, but the rarity and status of any gold label mech from the LMC could not be belittled. Ves worked hard to elevate the value of his handcrafted mechs exactly for moments like this. Commander Husaan knew what kind of treasure that Ves was offering.

"I'll also add in one of the first copies of the laser rifleman mech that's currently in development. I can't say too much about the design, except that it shares most of the traits of the Blackbeak and will certainly outclass any of your current rifleman mechs."

As much as Commander Husaan acted tough, every mercenary was a mech geek at some level. They passionately slobbered over mechs and could talk in detail about them to their fellow mercenaries. They favored different brands and followed the exploits of various famous mech designers.

As an up-and-coming mech designer, Ves hadn't managed to build a huge following outside of Cloudy Curtain, but his talent was more than evident from the meteoric rise of the LMC.

This might not be so important to Husaan personally, but he did not think about his own benefits.

Rather, he thought about how owning three prestigious mechs would affect the renown of the Oodis Mudriders.

Outfits that owned and flaunted rare and valuable mechs attracted a lot of attention, for good and ill, but mostly the former. Husaan fell silent as he thought about how he could use the gold label mechs as an opportunity to revive the Mudriders after surviving this assignment.

He could already see it now. With the surge of interest from the possession of the exclusive mechs, the Mudriders could easily replenish its ranks even if

most of the new hires would never be able to pilot the valuable machines. In effect, their combat effectiveness only played a secondary role compared to their fame. It was enough to treat them as mascots.

Husaan looked at Ves with a speculative look, but the mech designer kept his expression neutral and composed.

Ves did not open his mouth again because he did not want to fall into a trap. It did not cost the company a lot of resources to fabricate those mechs for the Mudriders. That did not mean that Ves was eager to fall into a one-man bidding war and be forced to raise his offer to a ludicrous level.

Three mechs was enough.

He did not know what Husaan was thinking about, but the man offered up his hand for a shake. "Deal."

After Ves left the mech stables, he silently sighed in relief. He only went out on a limb there. Although he could have raised the price if Husaan remained stubborn, even he had his limits.

It was an extremely unpleasant experience to be blackmailed by the mercenaries that you had already hired. The Mercenary Association heavily frowned upon what happened just then, although exchanges that happened under the table always took place anyway. This was one thing that no rule or regulation could abolish.

In any case, while Commander Husaan placed a lot of importance on those three mechs, the bureaucrats of the Mercenary Association would likely swipe away the report within the blink of an eye. After all, it was just three mechs. Ves might as well offer a fruit basket instead.

Just after Ves left the mech stables of the Mudriders, a lot of shouting and movement erupted from the place. Even if Commander Husaan let himself be

persuaded by Ves, it was another challenge entirely to convince the rest of his men to go along with Melkor's defense plans.

Ves left them to it and returned to the command center. Men and women dutifully labored to bring the Mech Nursery's defensive measures up to full readiness. While Sanyal-Ablin controlled most of the defensive systems, a handful of other functions remained in control of Ves and his forces.

Melkor looked up from a projection of an intricate battle simulation. It showed a large amount of miniature Vesian mechs punch through the outnumbered mechs from Sanyal-Ablin and begin to divide and surround each separate group of mechs.

Meanwhile, the mechs outside the base that represented the Whalers and the Mudriders stood in place, well away from the fight. They never moved forward for a single instant during the entire battle.

The simulation painted a very grim picture of what would happen.

"Ves." Melkor raised his head with a hopeful expression. "How did your talks go with Commander Husaan? Did he relent on his stance?"

"It took some convincing, and I also had to throw in an incentive, but he finally agreed to station his mechs at the front."

"Thank you! You've been a lifesaver for me! That's just what I needed!"

With the tentative cooperation of the Oodis Mudriders, the defenses at the walls stood a much better chance of surviving the initial push. Melkor showed Ves of how the battle might play out.

"If the Vesians stick to the most convenient strategy in their playbook, although I have to mention that there's no guarantee they'll stick to it, then our job will be to put up enough of a fight to make them reconsider."

Ves picked up on the distinction between Melkor's words. "You don't think there's any hope we can defeat the Vesians?"

"Impossible. All the evidence we've gathered suggests that the 3rd Imodris Legion is a standard Vesian Legion. That means that their mechs are designed and built to military standards and their mech pilots went through strict, systematic training. There's no way they'll expose any flaws for us to exploit. We have to beat them fair and square."

The problem with beating them fair and square was that the Mech Legion specialized in those kinds of fights much more than irregular mech outfits.

"So if we can't defeat them, we just try to bleed them as much as we can in the hope they get scared of all the blood they lose?"

"Essentially, that's the plan." Melkor nodded without shame. "It's a different story if the Mech Corps is stationed here, but all we have are a handful of disparate mech forces, and we're still outnumbered to boot as well. The only factor that's in our favor is that the Vesians won't be setting out for a fight to the death. They only want to do a quick smash and run attack."

Ves nodded. "We're not important enough to force them to sustain massive losses. Now that I think about it, it's already generous for the Vesians to send out two mech companies to destroy only three mech production lines. In their eyes, we are targets of opportunity."

"Exactly so. The 3rd Imodris Legion is hitting over twenty star systems at a time. They aren't necessarily out to inflict massive damage to our industries. They are attempting to put a dilemma on the Mech Corps forces stationed in the Bentheim System. Will they move out to reinforce the besieged star systems? Will they split up to help each system at once, and risk getting ambushed, or will they choose to abandon some systems in favor of more strategic ones?"

All of them posed very interesting questions, but Ves left the problem for the higher ups of the Mech Corps to come up with a response. Ves knew well enough that Cloudy Curtain ranked at the bottom of their priorities. He could not count on the Mech Corps to provide any timely assistance.

Ves studied the simulation along with Melkor. With the help of the Mudriders, the Vesians mechs had a much harder time trying to penetrate inside the complex. However, the simulation turned a little fuzzy then, which indicated that the Als found it difficult to predict what would happen next.

Melkor slammed his fist against the tabletop. "This buggy system!"

"Even if the Als could make up their minds, we can't rely on their results, Melkor. It's all up to fate right now."

"You're right." He sighed. "I predict that the Vesians have to sustain up to twenty percent losses to make them reconsider their raid. They won't shy away before then, because they're trained to accept adverse losses in the course of their duties. Their willpower can't be shaken. We can only hope their commander is rational enough to weigh the risk of further losses just to smash a single manufacturing complex."

With those words, Ves left Melkor with the final planning. Ves did not have much to bring to the table. Before the Vesians made their landing and revealed their mechs, Ves could not even use his expertise as a mech designer to identify any potential weak points.

Ves returned to his office and helped coordinate the evacuation of personnel and the buttoning down of various valuable equipment.

Everyone moved to prepare for the incoming raid. Over ten hours went by in relative quiet, only to be broken when the planet's perennial cloud cover momentarily parted to make room for a large number of mech transports.

The Vesians descended from orbit.

Chapter 388 Self-Harm

The combat carriers possessed the capability to descend from orbit and land on any planet with a standard amount of gravity. That did not mean they did it all the time. Any ship that landed on a planet became a sitting duck.

Therefore, the Vesian combat carriers remained in orbit and instead sent out smaller transport ships that conveyed the mechs to the surface.

One peculiar nature about Cloudy Curtain was its ever-present cloud cover. The clouds not only blocked vision, but various other signals as well, so the Vesians wouldn't be able to coordinate between their space and ground forces very well.

However, this did not hinder their operations too much, as Cloudy Curtain itself hosted numerous quantum entanglement nodes that maintained contact with the wider galaxy, which could all be hacked in many ways. The Vesians also deployed floating comm buoys to maintain secure lines of communication.

Most of the transports predictably flew towards Freslin. However, two transports deviated from the rest and headed towards Orinoco.

"How many mechs do these transports carry?" Ves asked as he stood besides Melkor in the command center.

His cousin carefully studied the models and also looked up the details on the galactic net. "This particular model normally carries six mechs. The Vesians apparently don't think much of us if they feel confident enough to hit two targets at the same time."

Both of them found the Vesian decision to be an unexpected gift. Their odds of withstanding the Vesian push drastically increased with the absence of those twelve-or-so enemy mechs.

"Will the Vesians wait for those mechs to finish up in Orinoco before attacking the Mech Nursery?"

"They shouldn't be." Melkor mused. "You have to be aware that the Vesian raiding force has already entered this system for more than half a day. The Mech Corps already knows about them and will free up a response force sooner or later. The Vesians don't want to stick around for too long. I predict they will only stay for two or three days at most."

Raiding forces only came equipped to attack rear echelon facilities. Neither their mechs or pilots could compare to the best of what the 3rd Imodris Legion had to offer. Furthermore, they also lacked the supplies to fight an extended drawn-out engagement.

Their plan was to get in and out as fast as possible, doing as much damage along the way as they could.

As a detachment of the Vesian raiders flew towards Orinoco, the citizens of the capital city panicked. Walter's Whalers practically left the city undefended, and only a handful of influential organizations maintained a loose collection of mechs.

These mechs would not be able to pose a threat at all. The strong pacifist tradition among the old elite discouraged any meaningful investment into forming a proper standing force of mechs. Some mechs even looked severely outdated to the point where only grandfathers and grandmothers could identify their exact model on sight.

The impending arrival of the Vesians at Orinoco led to a fierce discussion among the upper echelon. Representatives of the ruling coalition, the local businesses and the farming consortiums all gathered together to discuss potential countermeasures.

"I don't see why the two biggest consortiums are content to look on from afar! I know you guys have built up a secret force of mechs! This should be the best time to make use of them!"

"Those are slanderous rumors! We are peaceful farming consortiums. The war has nothing to do with us! It is categorically impossible for us to send out any mechs, because we don't have any in the first place!"

"Why are we arguing among ourselves when we don't even have any mechs to send out? Why do we not meet with the Whalers and attempt a reconciliation?"

"Are you kidding? They'll rob us blind if we attempt to negotiate with those thugs and brutes! Let us announce a widespread evacuation and hide out in the wilderness. The Vesians may be able to do an enormous amount of material damage, but we can always rebuild after they leave."

"My businesses will be ruined if the Vesians have free reign in Orinoco!"

As the different interest groups in Orinoco tried and failed to come to a consensus, a series of thunderous explosions happened outside. The force of the explosions shook the floor and even unsettled the footing of the people in the conference room.

A door slammed open as a security officer hastily entered the gathering. "Sirs! Massive explosions have destroyed the spaceport, the planetary assembly building, various storage yards and the headquarters of the five biggest companies in Orinoco. An anonymous message has only given the occupants two minutes of time to evacuate before the bombs set off!"

Several people looked at each other with a stricken expression. "Awful!"

The sudden chaos plunged the capital city in a full-blown pandemonium. People panicked and ran in every direction.

The Vesians spotted the destruction as well. Seeing that most of their strategic targets blew up on their own accord, the two transport ships that previously headed to Orinoco changed course and joined the main raiding force to Freslin instead.

Just this act alone revealed the motives of the explosions. By destroying the most valuable structures in and around the capital city ahead of time, the Vesians had no more reason to stop by.

"Who is responsible for those bombs!? Don't they know what they've done! This is naked treason!"

"Whoever destroyed my headquarters will pay!"

The consequences of such an act was very severe, but whoever bombed those places managed to accomplish their goal of diverting the Vesians away from their city. After all, if they didn't persuade the enemy transports to change course, the Imodris mechs may have decided to destroy a lot of other infrastructure as well.

While certain people in Orinoco sighed in relief, others in Freslin looked furious. In the command center, Ves looked grim.

"I knew it was too good to be true. It looks like we'll be facing the full force of the Vesians after all."

Unlike Ves, Melkor couldn't accept what had happened. As a bona fide Larkinson and a former cadet of the Mech Corps, he found the self-sabotaging actions of the bombers to be a profound betrayal of what it meant to be a citizen of the Bright Republic.

"The Mech Corps won't take this lying down! They'll certainly investigate the bombings after this is over!"

"I know you're angry, Melkor, but this isn't the time to focus your attention on those bastards hiding in Orinoco. We have to get ready to meet the Vesians."

The two lagging transports that previously headed towards Orinoco caught up to the main formation that flew towards Freslin. A tense hour went by as the transports reached a flat and uninhabited plain well outside Freslin. The Vesians deployed jammers at that moment, making detailed observation impossible with the equipment at hand.

"They've set down around forty kilometers away from our base." Melkor noted as he changed the center projection to a plot of the local terrain. "After their mechs embark from the transports, there is a chance they will stop by Freslin first. However, it doesn't have anything in particular worth destroying, so it's likely they'll go for the Mech Nursery as soon as they are deployed."

It did not take long for the Vesians mechs to move. After a brief period of organization, over eighty-five mechs set off in the direction of the Mech Nursery. Long-ranged sensors hidden in the forests around the Mech Nursery caught the broad strokes of the Vesian movements, but lacked the power and sophistication to observe any detailed information such as the type and models of the individual mechs.

"Eighty-five mechs is more formidable than we thought." Ves frowned as all of the readings tentatively concluded there was definitely more than eighty mechs on the move.

"The numbers are never exact. The amount of mechs in a standard Vesian company always fluctuates for some reason or another. Forty mechs is just a guideline."

The addition of five additional mechs mattered a lot to the defenders. It meant that they might have to beat at least five mechs more in order to make the Vesian commander lose heart in his raid.

If some unknown organization hadn't decided to blow up Orinoco ahead of time, then the Mech Nursery wouldn't have faced more than seventy-five mechs. Melkor couldn't help but boil up inside at the thought.

Still, he finally managed to get a grip. He adjusted his visor on his head, which maintained a blue glow for now. He started to issue some commands, directing most of the mechs from Sanyal-Ablin and the Mudriders to man the section of walls that faced the incoming threat.

The projected plot showed several dots moving into place. Most of them congregated at or behind the walls in spread out patterns several lines deep. Other mechs stationed themselves in the center or on the other sides of the walls.

"What's going on right now?" Ves asked.

"Before the Vesians come into range, they'll definitely try to soften us up."

It didn't take too long for Melkor's prediction to arrive. A swarm of missiles approached the Mech Nursery from a great distance. The Vesians had staggered the launches of the missiles so they would all arrive at their target at roughly the same instant.

"How many missiles?" Melkor barked to a sensor operator working behind a nearby console.

"Five-thousand missiles sir! They are all of a light design!"

Both Ves and Melkor relaxed a little. Light missiles packed the least amount of punch. That was not to say that they didn't feel threatened by the swarm of missiles, but at least it did not match their worst fears.

"Inform Sanyal-Ablin and every rifleman mech to intercept the missiles."

"Done sir, though Sanyal-Ablin says they've already moved."

Even though Melkor acted like a base commander, the truth was that none of the forces defending the Mech Nursery answered to him. Except for the Avatars of Myth, every other outfit involved in the defense listened to their own commanders.

That was why Ves considered Melkor to be a coordinator instead of a commander in this battle. He could only make suggestions that others might not follow up upon if they thought they knew better or if it harmed their interests.

"The upcoming battle hinges on the Mudriders." Melkor explained. "The mech pilots of Sanyal-Ablin are professional enough to do their duty, but your friends from the Whalers need a lot of encouragement in order to convince them to attack the Vesians from their flank. If the Mudriders can't hold off the initial push, everything else will fall apart."

"I'm confident Commander Husaan knows what's best for his mercenary corps, but I'm not sure if all of his mech pilots follow suit. Last I heard, a big argument erupted at their mech stables."

They no longer had any time to do anything about it. With the Vesians about to arrive at their doorsteps, they needed to trust in the measures they already prepared.

At this time, the high-flying missiles finally arced into view of the Mech Nursery.

At this time, the manufacturing complex had retracted almost all of the non-essential structures underneath the ground. The only structures that remained above ground consisted of defense measures.

The turrets grabbed the most attention. Over a hundred different turrets installed and control by Sanyal-Ablin automatically swiveled towards the incoming swarm of missiles before unleashing a rain of lasers and projectiles.

The anti-air fire struck a lot of missiles, but plenty more made it past the initial volleys. Even as the missile swarm visibly decreased, too much had been sent their way. Less than a thousand made it through and began to impact the entire surface of the inner perimeter.

Ves didn't look too worried at the explosions happening above his head. Most of the missiles landed on empty soil or impacted the walls and reinforcement enclosures that sheltered the defending mechs.

"Sanyal-Ablin's ECM is top-notch." Melkor nodded in satisfaction. "Over ninety percent of the missiles have been led astray. As expected of a subsidiary of a faction from a second-rate state."

Perhaps the Vesians hadn't expected the missiles to end up damaging barriers and clumps of dirt, because the eighty-five Vesian mechs suddenly slowed down their pace.

"They're beginning to realize we might not be the pushovers they thought we were." Melkor guessed what went on in the enemy's minds. "After all, hardly any company invests so much of their resources into fortifying their manufacturing complexes."

The two Larkinsons waited with baited breath at what the Vesians would do next.

Chapter 389 Prudence

The Vesian mech force unexpectedly paused in their approach. Neither Ves nor Melkor knew why, but they could make a guess.

"Haven't the Vesians gathered intelligence about the Mech Nursery?" Ves asked with a puzzle tone. "Surely they must have known what they were about to face?"

"They might not have done their due diligence. In their eyes, the LMC is just a regular up-and-coming mech manufacturer with only two years of history at

most. Can you say that every mech manufacturer is able to erect such a massive defensive installation as the Mech Nursery in such a brief amount of time?"

Definitely not. Anyone who casually read his background would know that Ves only possesses a distant backer. Being a nominal disciple to a Master Mech Designer did not afford him a lot of protection regarding these situations. Some Masters even apprenticed thousands of mech designers at once and only instructed them casually if they spared the time for them in the first place.

In any case, the amount of growth he experienced in recent times was very much out of the norm for an Apprentice Mech Designer of his age and background. Now that the Vesians became aware that they faced something other than a pushover, they must have paused to reassess their plans.

"It's too bad their commander is prudent enough to interrupt their approach." Melkor shook his head. "I would have preferred if whoever is leading them is overconfident. That way, it's easier to spring them into our traps."

"We can't have everything. At least we've increased their apprehension to us."

"Not really. The Vesians still won't think much of us once they find out how many mechs are defending this place. They still outnumbered us by a comfortable margin."

It only took about ten minutes for the Vesians to make their move. This time, the main formation of mechs remained in place while over twenty mechs started to sweep forward in different directions.

"Damn! They're being especially careful now."

The maneuver revealed that the commander of the Imodris raiding force wanted to scout out their target before they made their next moves. It was the safest and most considerate action to take, and it did not take that much time to gather intel as the Mech Nursery was only so large.

Just as they stared at the plot which kept track of the approaching enemy scouts, Melkor suddenly received a comm request. He accepted it, causing a projection of Husaan's face to appear next to the central projector.

"The Vesians have sent out their scouts. Let us out of the walls, and we'll hunt them down! We're fast enough to catch at least a third of them off-guard!"

"No." Melkor immediately replied. "Remain in place. The Vesians may be dangling some bait in order to draw us out. Let them come to us."

"...Understood."

Ves scratched his head. "Isn't it better to deal with the scouts now that they've separated from the main body? This is a good opportunity to whittle down their numbers."

"Do you think the Vesians are that easy to fool? Don't trust what the sensors are telling you. I bet this stationary group of mechs here have already started moving elsewhere. And those dots that depict solitary mechs might be accompanied by four or five more mechs each."

"Ah." Ves realized Melkor's point. The Vesians might have already been aware of the sensors placed in their surroundings. If they knew that others spied on their mechs, they would have deployed their own countermeasures. "But how will we know where they are if we can't trust this plot?"

"We wait until they arrive. As long as we don't take the bait, they'll eventually give up on their tricks and resort to the direct approach."

A tense hour passed as the Imodris Legion scouts came into visual view of the Mech Nursery. The high walls blocked most of their direct vision, but that hardly halted their attempts to observe the defensive measures of the base as most of their sensors did not need line of sight to work. Merely getting close enough was sufficient.

Melkor tasked a couple of marksmen to shoot at the scouts whenever they thought they could pull off a shot. While most of them missed, they successfully curbed the brazenness of the scouts.

Not once did Melkor command anyone to go out and hunt down the scouts. Sanyal-Ablin's mechs consisted of mediumweight models that specialised in defense. They could never catch up to the light mechs.

Only the Oodis Mudriders might have been able to do so, considering that a fair chunk of their forces consisted of light mechs. In truth, these light mechs did not make for good defenders, but Melkor was deeply unwilling to pull them away from their walls. Their light firepower might mean the difference between victory or defeat.

After the scouting phase ended and the light mechs pulled back, the Vesians arrived just beyond the maximum engagement range without any attempt to obfuscate their approach.

They stopped short of coming into rifle range. Instead, they spread out and guarded every approach. Moments later, it became apparent why they did so.

A dozen or so artillery mechs began to shell the walls. The explosions ruptured the surface of the walls made out of a blend of junk exotics and various bulk materials. Although they looked extremely firm and thick, they couldn't withstand a concentrated artillery barrage.

Melkor gritted his teeth. "The Vesians usually don't bother to shell an industrial target. Their commander appears to be an exception. He's treating us like a serious target."

None of the mechs or turrets possessed the capability to retaliate against the distant artillery mechs. The most they could do was shoot at the incoming shells as they arced into the walls. More than two-thirds of the incoming shells

never reached the Mech Nursery, but the remainder that got through slowly broke down the targeted section of walls.

Minutes passed by as the cracks turned into a hole, before widening up into a breach. After the last shells landed, the breach had become so wide that it could fit two mechs walking side by side.

"That's not good." Ves noted.

The artillery mechs then shifted their aim towards the turrets spread throughout the surface of the Mech Nursery.

The weaknesses of the turrets hammered home with each shell that got through the intercepting fire. Their complete lack of mobility turned them into stationary targets that would get destroyed sooner or later.

If the Vesian artillery mechs hadn't managed to destroy their target in their current salvo, they just sent out another one until the turret finally stopped working.

This went on for over two hours until the artillery mechs expended all of their shells. By then, over seventy percent of the turrets that Sanyal-Ablin had previously erected turned into hollowed-out ruins.

Fortunately, no one lost their lives, as nobody manned the turrets. Their operators worked at a SASS-controlled command center deep underground.

By now, the Mech Nursery hardly hosted any people. The only people who remained consisted of those who played a role in the defense of the facility. As for the civilian employees, Ves all sent them back to Freslin where they lived.

Even if the Vesians managed to breach through their lines and massacre everyone within, at least Ves wouldn't have too much guilt on his conscience.

"What will they do next, now that they've destroyed most of our turrets?"

"They've spent several hours on the surface already." Melkor replied. "The Vesians should be looking to wrap this up. The longer they stay on the surface, the higher the chance they'll encounter the reinforcements from Bentheim. No matter how careful the enemy commander wants to be, he can't fall behind schedule."

Every defender tersely waited for the Vesians to make their next move. Evidently, they had enough of paying around, because they shifted their formation in favor breaching through a defensive line.

Surprisingly enough, the Vesians suddenly put forth two heavy knights.

"Damn! They brought out heavy knights! They'll be leading the charge!"

Ves did not need to hear an explanation to realize how bad the situation turned against them. If the Vesians only brought their medium mechs, then they stood a decent chance at fending off the incoming Vesians.

Now though, the appearance of the heavy knights changed everything. Even the most basic models of heavy knights withstood at least four times as much damage as a medium knight. In effect, the two heavy knights possessed as much as an impact on the battle as eight extra medium knights!

In general, only military forces employed heavy mechs. Not even Sanyal-Ablin fielded a single heavy mech despite having the resources and capacity to do so if they borrowed their backer's help.

The appearance of the heavy mechs alone caused everyone's morale to drop. Every mech pilot from SASS and the Mudriders knew how tough these mechs could be. The odds of killing them fast enough was minute.

"Ves! Conventional forces will take too much time to bring down those heavies! By the time they can be repelled, every other Vesian mech will have free reign inside the perimeter. We have to take those heavy mechs out early!"

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because you frequently pull a miracle out of their butt! If you're hiding a secret weapon, then this is the time to employ it!"

"Well, I've got the Amastendira. Will that be enough?"

Melkor shook his head. "I've already considered it. While it's a devastating weapon against people, it won't do too much damage against mechs. A beam at maximum power is probably capable of piercing through the armor of light mechs while dealing heavy damage to medium mechs, but it will just bounce off if pointed at a heavy mech."

That was really bad news, but Ves already expected something along those lines. The Amastendira granted its wielder near-absolute superiority against any kind of human-scale battles. Sadly, it did not change the paradigm that humans would be able to defeat a mech in an even fight.

A group of two heavy knights accompanied by thirty mechs started to form into an assault formation. The melee mechs stood in front while the ranged mechs stood at the rear.

"It's going to be too late to do anything soon! Ves! Tell me you've got something!"

Ves panicked a little. He did not possess any other deadly weapons like the Amastendira. Neither would he be able to purchase any other solutions from the System as he recently drained most of his DP on his second Mastery.

Only until Lucky lazily flew past his vision did he remind himself that he might have one last resort.

"Lucky!"

The cat halted in its flight and turned its head at Ves. "Meow?"

He pointed at the projection of the heavy knights readying themselves for a charge. "Can you take care of these two heavy mechs? You have to assassinate the pilots and destroy some controls or essential components. Can you do that?"

"...Meow."

Lucky did not meow in a reassuring way. The cat looked at the two heavy mechs with their thick plating of armor with very visible dread. It would be tough for his intangible form to burrow through all of that compressed armor.

The cat tapped the air a couple of times. Ves communicated frequently enough with his pet to understand Lucky's vague meaning.

"So you say you can definitely take out one mech, but you're not sure if you have the energy to take out the other?"

"Meow!"

"One heavy mech taken out is better than none!" Melkor told them from the side.

"He's right, Lucky. If you can do it, then go for it!"

Lucky hastily floated out of the command center in a zip. None of the sensors showed his position, which worried Ves a little, but at least the Vesians wouldn't have any warning either.

He hated sending out Lucky so early in this battle. Ves wanted to save up Lucky as a trump card or employ him as an assassin that would quietly take out a couple of enemy mechs stationed furthest from the main battle. Instead, the appearance of the heavy mechs forced Ves to play this card ahead of time.

The battle hadn't even entered its most crucial phase and Ves already started running out of cards to play.

As Ves waited for Lucky to make his move, Melkor turned to leave the command center as well. "There's nothing more I can do here. I'll be boarding my mech before I join up with the rest of the Avatars. Stay here and keep me informed, Ves."

"Will do."

At least Melkor could fight the the Vesians personally. As a mech designer, Ves enjoyed no such privilege.

Chapter 390 Pressure

Besides the two heavy knights that attracted most of the attention of the defenders, the other Imodris mechs looked well-built as well. Ves forcefully shook off his fear and began to focus on what he could do to help.

"As a mech designer, I can still be of use."

Out of all the defenders, he knew more about mechs than everyone else put together.

In battles like these, mech designers sometimes assisted frontline units by analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy mechs. They also kept their eye out for weak points generated by battle damage.

Ves kept his eyes trained on the projections that showed the approaching Vesian formation. The enemy finished their preparations and began to set out towards the broken gap in the wall.

Now that the enemy came into range of the Mech Nursery, their jamming failed to block its powerful sensors. Detailed telemetry poured into the command center in rapid tempo, swamping the support personnel. They tried their best to help the processors identify the mech models.

"Report!" Ves barked.

"Sir! The enemy regiments have been identified. One company comes from the 5th Vavulan Chasseurs and the other company is detached from the 1st Meandering Monkeys!"

Additional projections popped up that provided a brief overview of the two regiments of the 3rd Imodris Legion.

The mechs 1st Meandering Monkeys all took on a mottled brown-green coating, and predominantly consisted of light and medium mechs. Much like the Oodis Mudriders, the Monkeys excelled in long-range wilderness operations, and would usually be deployed in wild, untamed planets.

The 5th Vavulan Chasseurs on the other hand consisted largely of frontline mechs coated in grey and pale blue to better blend in to an urban environment. They eschewed light mechs entirely and based their full force around medium melee mechs and a fair amount of medium frontline mechs, the latter of which replaced their humanoid arms with ballistic cannons or laser cannons.

Ves understood the enemy composition. The Meandering Monkeys only made up the numbers and didn't form that much of a threat. The true threat lay in the Vavulan Chasseurs, whose formidable mechs had been designed to break through enemy defenses. Their allocation of two heavy knights to this minor raid further underscored their power.

Right now, they couldn't withstand two heavy knights at once. It was not that the heavy knights possessed the means to run down every mech and kill them in a single blow. Their true threat lay in their ability to act as immovable obstacles that absorbed everything the defenders dished out.

Having just come off a Mastery experience where the attacking force cleverly used disposable heavy shields as a means of approach, Ves knew the value of an impenetrable defense. So long as those heavy knights remained

operational, a large portion of the mechs from Sanyal-Ablin and Mudriders would have to divert their firepower to hold back their inexorable march.

At this time, the Vesian mechs entered into range of the defending mech's rifles.

"Open fire!"

Almost every rifleman mech among the defenders proceeded to open fire behind the walls. The initial volley of fire largely hit their marks, only to be stopped by two enormous tower shields.

"The Vesians have sustained minimal damage!"

The Vesians cleverly arranged their assault formation into a column of two ranks. With the two heavy knights in front, the more vulnerable mechs at the rear had little to worry about.

Occasionally, some of the fire slipped around or above the shields, but the rest of the Vesian mechs only sustained glancing damage.

Despite enduring a rain of fire, the Vesian mechs remained in formation and continued to march forward. The only downside to their formation was that they moved at a snail's pace in terms of mech speeds.

Heavy knights carried an immense amount of high-quality armor, and their shields weighed as much as an entire light mech or more, so it was a given that they moved as fast as an elderly person.

Their relatively slow pace meant that the defenders slowly managed to chew up the shields. Nevertheless, these shields did their job as they forced the defenders to expend a large amount of munitions that might have otherwise been targeted at the lighter mechs.

As the formation of Chasseurs neared the walls, the mechs of the Meandering Monkeys started to branch out and pressure the sides of the

Mech Nursery. Their diversion forced Melkor to request the Mudriders to split some mechs away from the center and deter the flanking mechs from breaching an undefended part of the wall.

"Fire on the mechs behind the knights!" Melkor ordered in the central command channel.

Once the enemy mechs entered a certain range, it became possible for some of the defending mechs stationed in the far left or right of the walls to target the sides of the incoming column. This time, they achieved some solid hits, although the frontline mechs quickly turned their cannon and retaliated in kind.

Most of their fire splashed against the walls that the defending mechs hid behind, but the intense barrage succeeded in suppressing them. At this moment, the inevitable collision became imminent. The Chasseurs showed movement that indicated that they were about to bypass their heavy knights and breach the defensive line.

"Open fire! Ignore the knights! Focus on the frontline mechs!"

The melee mechs of the Chasseurs carried a substantial amount of armor. The frontline mechs on the other hand had been built to scale, so their individual quality left much to be desired. Their deadliness came not from their superior equipment, but from the training and coordination of their mech pilots.

Even though their basic-level pilots would never be able to advance to advanced pilots, as long as they gathered in a sufficient amount of numbers, they would be able to suppress any enemy formation, which was what they did right now.

Their twin cannon barrels outputted as least twice as much firepower as a rifleman mech. What they lacked in flexibility and close-combat effectiveness, they more than made it up in the sheer amount of firepower they could unleash in a short amount of time.

Of course, they also overheated very quickly and expended their energy or munitions rather fast, but in a short raid like this, endurance didn't matter too much.

The only reason why the defenders maintained their ground was because the cheap construction of the frontline mechs also made it easy to take them out. Plenty of mechs turned inoperable after sustained concentrated fire, but the Chasseurs continued unabated. They had already steeled themselves for some losses.

To the Mech Legion, losing a couple of frontline mechs was nothing, as each of them came with a unit price of around ten million credits or less. Their mech pilots mostly managed to eject well in time, so the Vesians actually hadn't lost any lives at this point in time.

"Watch your fire! Don't aim too high! We can't afford to hit their cockpits when they eject!"

The Mudriders and the Sanyal-Ablin mechs purposefully avoided targeting the cockpits of the Vesian mechs. Neither groups wanted to incur any more enmity than necessary. If news came out that they excessively slaughtered too many enemy pilots, then they would certainly be hunted down by the 3rd Imodris Legion.

The Mech Legion on the other hand held no such scruples. If they saw an opportunity to eliminate an enemy pilot, they would gladly do so in order to damage the Bright Republic's vitality.

At this time, imposing manner of the Vesians reached an oppressive level. Many of the mech pilots stationed on the walls started to vacillate. Why did they even need to resist the Vesians in the first place? Neither the quality nor the quantity of their mechs could match the combined force of the Chasseurs and the Monkeys.

Melkor tried his best to firm up their side's resolve, but everyone knew that the battle might take a turn for the worst once the enemy melee mechs came into play. To the Chasseurs, their frontline mechs only played a side role. The regiment invested most of its resources in cultivating their melee mechs.

Ves quietly stood in front of the central projector of the command center and balled his fingers into fists. "Come on, buddy. Make your move before it's too late."

Just as the Vesians were about to make their final sprint, one of their heavy knights suddenly halted. Even though the mech's shield had almost been chewed apart from withstanding all of the enemy fire, the frame itself only suffered a couple of scuffs. The mech still possessed a lot of fight, and shouldn't have halted so suddenly.

The momentary halt of that mech caused the entire column of Chasseurs to come to an uneven halt. Many of their pilots turned their attention to their halted comrade, unsure why the mech turned into a statue.

Moments later, fumes started to leak from the frame. Small explosions erupted deep within the frame that destroyed vital components. The heavy knight abruptly powered down and fell over facedown like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Everyone was taken aback, including the defenders. What had happened to that seemingly invincible mech?

Moments later, a tiny blur escaped from the chest of the fallen heavy mech. It darted towards the next heavy knight, only to be met with a barrage of fire from a couple of quick-thinking mechs. The fire went straight through the tiny blur, forcing it away from its original course. In order to escape the fury of the Chasseurs, the blur instead changed course and dove deep underground.

"I knew you could do it, Lucky!"

His pet managed to succeed in taking out a heavy knight! Even though his sneak attack only worked once, the consequences for the Vesians were dire. With the takedown of one heavy mech, the remaining one now became the focus of the defending mechs. They all diverted their firepower to that heavy, blasting apart its shield in short succession and started working away at the mech's heavy armor plating.

While the Vavulan Chasseurs fell into a brief bout of confusion, to their credit they regained their senses extraordinarily quickly. They all became enraged at the strange attack and switched tack almost immediately. Their mechs all charged forward at their full speed, leaving the defending melee mechs scrambling to meet the charge.

"Hold the line! Set off the traps!"

The ground before the Vesian mechs briefly exploded as mines hidden just below their feet became armed.

Although the explosions all hit multiple mechs, their power left much to be desired. In order to hide them from the Vesian scanners, they only came in relatively small packages.

Still, even if the mines mostly failed to breach the armor of the stricken mechs, they did succeed in slowing their charge. Ultimately, this caused the Chasseurs to clash against the defensive line with less than perfect force.

Still, the line almost buckled then and there as the handful of knights failed to withstand the impact of the charging mechs.

For a moment, both sides recovered from the charge, but then the true melee began.

"Hold them back! Don't let them through the gap!"

The previous artillery bombardment opened up a wide gap in the defensive walls that the defending mechs struggled to stopper up. However, the intensity in which the Chasseurs pressed down upon them indicated that they wouldn't be able to hold for long.

Ves frantically studied the mechs of the Chasseurs, but found to his disappointment that they'd been too well-designed to expose any obvious weak points. Only upon sustaining damage would vulnerabilities begin to show, but that was easier said than done as the Vesians constantly rotated the mechs that faced the front.

As soon as a mech sustained a heavy blow, it pulled back and another mech of the Chasseurs filled its place. This spread out the damage and prevented the Chasseurs from suffering a loss in combat effectiveness.

This way, they managed to maintain a constant level of pressure to the defenders, who all lacked the numbers to pull off the same tricks.

The mechs of the Oodis Mudriders suffered the most out of this exchange. They possessed relatively few medium mechs, and most of them hadn't been designed for a stand-up battle. Several of their mechs succumbed in quick succession, prompting Melkor to make his move ahead of time.