

Chapter 391 Rallying Cry

"Mudriders! Pull back from the front and go to the flanks! Contain the Meandering Monkeys and prevent them from breaching our flanks!"

Commander Husaan eagerly pulled back all of his surviving mechs. In their place, the Avatars of Myth finally committed to the battle.

Although the defensive line instantly stabilized at their arrival, neither Ves nor Melkor smiled, because according to their plans, they should have kept the Avatars in reserve for a longer time.

Still, the Avatars fought valiantly, proving that Melkor did an excellent job in hiring the initial cadre. Led by Melkor himself, their ranged mechs laid down accurate support fire from an elevated position on the walls. They mainly trained their firepower on the frontline mechs hanging back from the melee.

"Knights, pin down that incoming heavy mech! Don't let it shoulder its way inside!"

The melee mechs led by the two gold label Blackbeaks crashed against the Vesian mech with uncharacteristic fury. The two mech pilots of the Blackbeak got caught up in the fervor and fought back with ferocity. They pushed aside the enemy medium mechs and approach the sole surviving heavy knight from two different directions.

"Out of the way, you puny mechs!" The brash and angry mech pilot of the heavy knight broadcasted.

The Blackbeaks purposefully ignored the warning and began their awe-inspiring clash with the heavy knight. While the Blackbeaks quickly showed that they couldn't withstand a frontal clash against the heavy knight, their superior mobility allowed them to circle around their lumbering opponent and pressure its vulnerable back.

This forcefully halted the forward momentum of the heavy knight, because it could ill afford to let an enemy pester its slightly weaker rear armor!

"Annoying gnats! Stand still for me!"

The heavy knight continued make wide horizontal sweeps with its large broadsword, only for the nimble Blackbeaks to jump back well before the blade reached their former position.

The two elegantly-styled mechs continued their dance around the heavy knight. The red vapor leaking from their red-dyed relief-studded shoulder pauldrons caused the area around the heavy knight to be partially obscured in bloody mist.

Ves estimated the cost of the heavy mech to be around 300 million credits. To be held back by a pair of mechs with a fair market price of around 100 million credits was very impressive.

As the heavy mech become more flustered, Ves became more familiar with its design. He opened a channel to the two pilots of the Blackbeak and issued some advice.

"The knight you're facing is very top-heavy! Its legs look sturdy, but they're actually strained to their limits! Focus on the rear knee joints, it's the weakest part of its legs!"

"The sword its wielding is large and heavy, but the arms are burdened by an excessive amount of armor! Forget about trying to chip away at the arms, it's actually a trap!"

"It's left side is its former shield side. The heavy knight is balanced only when it wields its tower shield. Now that it's gone, its balance is out of whack. Press its left side to further destabilize its footing!"

The vulnerabilities he pointed out did not lead to an instant defeat, but they successfully enabled the pilots of the Blackbeaks to keep the heavy knight on its back footing.

Not even the Vesians expected for their heavy knight to be pinned down by a pair of knights. The rest of the Chasseurs began to move to help out their beleaguered comrade, only to be stalled by the rest of the Avatars and Sanyal-Ablin mechs.

The front line fell into a momentary stalemate, but that would only last ten minutes at most. The mechs from Sanyal-Ablin had the edge in quality, but they were hard-pressed to hold back the superior numbers of the Chasseurs, especially since they didn't attack as a horde but instead utilized rigid coordination.

Ves knew that grueling grinds like these tested each side's resolve and depth. On both accounts, he favored the Vesians over the defenders. None of them besides the Avatars truly wished to stand their ground. The LMC was just a client to them. Once the battle turned ugly for them, Ves had no doubt their will to battle would plummet.

Every minute, another mech succumbed, mostly on the defending side. A couple of pilots died or sustained heavy wounds, but most decided to eject early rather than risk their lives. This hastened the attrition of the defending side, and despite the valiant efforts of the Avatars of Myth, they could not halt the overall trend.

"Damnit, where is Dietrich and his mechs?" Ves wondered.

Due to all of the enemy jamming, Ves lost contact with the Whalers stationed outside of Freslin.

On the flanks, the situation didn't look much better. The Meandering Monkeys took advantage of the Mech Nursery's lack of numbers to defend its perimeter and spread out to pressure the walls from multiple directions.

The turrets that survived the previous artillery bombardment suppressed them from climbing over the walls for now, but the Monkeys constantly whittled them down with their ranged weapons. They jumped and ran around with such fleeting grace that the turret operators hardly managed to land any hits.

The situation on the flanks alleviated a little bit when the surviving Mudrider mechs moved to face the flanking Monkeys. This curbed their daring actions, but only for a limited time. The Mudriders were outnumbered at least two-to-one and the turrets would only last long against the full might of the light mech company.

As Ves bit his lips, a crackling comm channel came to life. "Ves!"

"Dietrich, you're here!" Ves responded with a much-relieved tone.

This entire battle revealed the precarious nature of the defenders. With any help, Ves predicted that the Vesians would have no trouble breaking through the perimeter.

The timely arrival of thirty friendly mechs breathed a lot of life into Ves.

"Where are you right now? Are you in a position to hit the Vesians?"

"We're two minutes out. We can already see the flashes and hear the noise from here! Fadah and I are leading our rookies forward as we speak, but don't put your hopes up on our mechs! They're rookies for a reason!"

"You don't have to hammer the Vesians. As long as you can divert their attention and split them up, it's enough!"

Ves filled Dietrich in on the current tactical situation. While Dietrich wanted to turn the Whalers towards the 1st Meandering Monkeys, Ves argued otherwise.

"The Monkeys are a distraction! Defeating them while they're all dispersed will take too much time. By then, the 5th Vavulan Chasseurs will have succeeded in breaking through. We can't let that happen!"

As long as they stalled the Chasseurs and inflicted increasingly severe losses, the Vesians would finally begin to realize it wasn't so easy to break into the Mech Nursery. At that point, their commander had no choice but consider the gains and losses of continuing the raid.

However, in order to reach that point, the combined defensive force had to inflict enough casualties to make the Vesians second-guess their actions.

Ves proceeded to watch on as the loose collection of Whaler mechs approached the sides of the main engagement. They met a couple of scouts from the Monkeys, which lost them the element of surprise, not that they counted upon it in the first place.

Instantly, the Vesians adjusted their maneuvers. Some of the flanking Monkeys pulled back from trading potshots at the Mudriders and moved in the direction of the incoming reinforcements. As for the Chasseurs, they did not let up their forward assault, but instead turned most of their frontline mechs around to face the Whalers.

"Damnit, careful Dietrich! They're sending out all of their frontline mechs along with a number of light mechs in your direction!"

Those frontline mechs might not be clad in a lot of armor, but they possessed a lot of firepower and could run at a decent speed as well.

As the two sides clashed, the Whaler mechs instantly became entangled in a messy firefight. Although they utilized much better mechs than before, their young mech pilots proved incapable of drawing out their strengths.

Compared to the old guard who largely perished in the Glowing Planet campaign, the fresh-faced recruits lacked a lot of hands-on battle experience. Facing an even number of light and frontline mechs, the mechs commanded by Dietrich couldn't help but falter in their steps.

Dietrich, Fadah and the handful of veteran pilots did all they could to shepherd the rookies, but they already had their hands full trying to resist the elites among the Vesian mechs.

Even though the arrival of the reinforcements from Walter's Whalers failed to make a big of an impact as Ves had hoped, at least they successfully diverted a large portion of the enemy mechs.

The main engagement at the gap of the walls still proceeded frigidly. Sanyal-Ablin failed to persist when they still drew the attention of an entire company of Chasseurs. A handful of their mechs fell had steadily fallen in the last couple of minutes. With each single casualty, the battle turned further and further out of their favor.

To be frank, even with the successful diversion of the frontline mechs, the remaining defenders still fell into an awkward situation.

Just as Ves contemplated doing something drastic, the battle between the three knights finally came to a conclusion.

One of the Blackbeaks retracted the sword that had punched through the ragged-looking rear armor of the heavy knight. The weighty mech quickly collapsed while the two Blackbeaks banged their swords against their battered shields before raising them into the sky.

"Avatars!" They shouted into the open.

The pure exultation in their voice along with their dramatic victory couldn't help but lessen the inevitable air of victory around the Chasseurs. The Vesians grew indignant, and quickly diverted some of their mechs to take out the Blackbeaks.

"Come! Let us see if you have what it takes to take down a Myth!"

The two knight pilots brazenly taunted the Chasseurs. If Ves didn't suspect them of doing so spontaneously, he would have thought it was a deliberate ploy to lower the morale of their opponents.

In any case, their actions succeeded in changing the overall pattern of the most crucial portion of the battle. The battle at the gap in the walls turned into a muddled mess as the Chasseurs tried to vent their fury on the two Blackbeaks.

However, the gold label mechs proved difficult to pin down. Unlike the lumbering heavy mech, their lighter and more balanced construction allowed them to dance aside most attacks. Those that landed on their shield or armor only dented them a bit or created shallow cuts. Compressed armor was no joke, and without exerting enough force, the mechs of the Chasseurs wouldn't have much success in punching through the layers.

"We can do it!" Ves faintly hoped.

The valor displayed by the two Blackbeaks astounded everyone. Much of that came from the skilled handling of their mech pilots. Melkor had indeed picked up a pair of treasures on Bentheim.

However, these pilots only felt free to act this way because they piloted an excellent pair of mechs. These two particular gold label mechs had been the latest copies of their line. Ves improved much in recent times, and he managed to pass on some of these benefits to his latest handcrafted mechs.

Although the physical performance of the mechs hadn't received much of a bump, they still boasted superior agility due to the gems that Ves had secretly implanted in them. In addition, their X-Factor came out a bit stronger than before, as Ves invested a substantial amount of mind energy into their construction.

Both of these factors boosted the performance of the Blackbeaks to an unheard of level.

Just as Ves thought that the battle had taken a turn for the better, another mech from the Chasseurs appeared from the rear.

Ves instantly felt his joy bleeding away at the sight of the incoming mech. The quality of this mech stood out starkly. This must be the commander of the raiding force, and by the looks of his fancy mech, he must be a noble as well.

Chapter 392 Personal Intervention

The nobility enjoyed an exalted status in the Vesia Kingdom. They stood above the vast majority of commoners in each single aspect. Even the non-hereditary knights who earned their titles through merits also operated within the Kingdom with impunity.

Wealth, power, status and more became within reach if one acquired a noble rank. As a citizen of the more egalitarian Bright Republic, Ves and the rest of his state simply couldn't wrap their heads around why the Vesians accepted the rigid caste-like division of society.

When the experts spoke about the noble phenomenon, they simply shrugged their shoulders and explained it was a matter of culture. In other words, every citizen of a kingdom state had been brainwashed from birth to accept such a backwards-sounding structure.

After all, with the continued advance of science and technology, the ancient justifications such as the Mandate of Heaven, the Divine Right of Kings,

superior bloodlines and other such excuses had been debunked as pure excuses.

The various states set up as feudal monarchies simply couched their privileges in more modern terms. Most of the times, the various kingdoms justified their right to rule by pointing out their investment in terraforming the planets and establishing the colonies.

Once the initial population accepted the rulership structure, it slowly became a given that their state would always be ruled by so-called royals and the aristocracy. Humans possessed the capacity to accept all kinds of absurdities as long as everyone else around them believed them as well.

Right now, the entire battle for the Mech Nursery entered a brief pause at the sudden entrance of the Vesian commander. Ves zoomed in on the projection and studied the mech in more detail.

It was definitely a mech that surpassed the typical premium price point. The abundance of jewels and decorative alloys alone must have cost as much as a Blackbeak, but they only made up a portion of the exterior of this flamboyant-looking mech.

Ves peered at the epaulet on the left shoulder of the mech. It depicted a hand holding aloft a notched sword being shone upon by a single golden star.

"So it's a knight."

That meant the noble certainly earned his knighthood through his own efforts. Ves would have rather faced a baron than a knight, because the latter often turned out to be mediocre descendants of brilliant mech pilots.

"Sir Ravanac!" The Chasseurs broadcasted in the open. Their morale instantly surged while the morale of the defenders plummeted.

This Sir Ravanac calmly stepped forward as if he was approaching a picnic instead of a battle. His mech consisted of a mace-wielding medium melee mech. It carried a heavy two-handed mace that looked heavy enough to crunch the armor of any unmech. Only comechs such as the Blackbeaks appeared to be sturdy enough to withstand a direct hit.

The more Ves studied its design, the more his expression soured. "This mech is too high-class!"

He should have anticipated that the raiding force would be led by a noble who piloted a powerful mech. His machine alone could wipe out every defending mech with ease as long as the rest of the Chasseurs and the Monkeys tied them down.

Ves knew he had to intervene in person. He turned away from the central projectors and moved to exit the command center.

"Tell Melkor to stall the noble as long as he can!"

As he ran through the halls and reached the surface, he stepped on a small but swift floater platform and commanded it to convey him right towards the breach.

The speed of the platform caused the wind to whip against his form, but the floater platform's sophisticated antigrav modules and inertial dampeners allowed him to comfortably remain on his feet.

Even as he travelled to the front, Ves kept his eye on his comm, which projected what happened once the noble reached the battle.

Melkor tried to approach and drag out the fight by engaging in a conversation with the knight, but Sir Ravanac did not brook any further delays.

"Enough! Press the attack! Wipe out these Republican dogs and smash this entire factory into pieces!"

The Chasseurs resumed their fight with twice as much vigor now that their noble commander personally took charge.

The mechs from Sanyal-Ablin had almost reached their breaking point, and this sudden push only accelerated their inevitable defeat. Even with the Avatars of Myth backing them up, they wouldn't last very long.

Sir Ravanac's mace-wielding mech entered the fray as well. Melkor quickly decided to command his two knight mech pilots to divert the noble as long as possible.

The two Blackbeaks moved to stall Sir Ravanac's mech. Unlike before where they faced a sluggish heavy mech, Sir Ravanac possessed a much better balance between power, speed and armor. Sir Ravanac's abundant experience also allowed him to maneuver around the chaotic battlefield in a way that prevented the Blackbeaks from pincering it from two different directions.

While the Chasseurs led by their commander almost overran the defenders, the battle at the flanks fared no better for the defenders.

Dietrich, Fadah and the handful of veterans failed to stiffen the backs of their rookie pilots. The quick and agile mechs of the Meandering Monkeys constantly played tricks on the newly recruited Whalers. In every area short of weight class, the mechs of the Whalers fell short compared to the Vesian machines.

"Sorry Ves!" Dietrich sent out as his aerial marksman supported his rookies from a low altitude. If he flew any higher, he risked being shot from the air by the frontline mechs that supported the light mechs from the rear. "We can't get rid of these Vesian light mechs! It's taking all we can to preserve our mechs!"

With no further hope for reinforcements, the Mech Nursery was about to be broken through. Without a cohesive force of mechs to stop the raiding force,

the Vesians would easily be able to penetrate past the gates and wreak havoc inside the underground floors.

The various defenses and barriers integrated in the tunnels would only slow down the Vesians up to a point. Only mechs could defeat other mechs. That was the ironclad rule in these kinds of war.

When Ves finally reached the gap in the walls, the Avatars of Myth and the Sanyal-Ablin mechs already started pulling out. The Chasseurs succeeded in pushing through the gap, though they paid for their aggression with the loss of a couple more mechs.

Ves controlled the floater platform and manually controlled its flight path to climb on top of the walls.

At this point, no one paid attention to a single person, but Ves knew this would change very soon.

With one hand, he activated his Full Stealth module, and with his other hand he drew the Amastendira from his pocket, which unfolded into an elegant-looking laser pistol.

Once the Amastendira came online, he dialed its output to the highest setting possible. When facing mechs, he could not skimp out on power.

"I've only got ten shots. I have to make the most of what I have."

At the highest power setting, the Amastendira would only be able to pump out ten high-powered beams before it forcefully entered a lengthy cooldown cycle.

It was a heavy price, but a worthy one as well. The setting was meant to pose a threat to mechs, however slightly.

"With this pistol's maximum output combined with my aim, it's probably futile for me to try and take out Sir Ravanac's mech."

The Amastendira still possessed enough power to threaten a mech clad in compressed armor, but he'd have to be precise enough to hit a weak point. Melkor might be able to pull that off, but Ves held no such confidence.

After weighing the matter back and forth, Ves decided to strike the tightly-packed formation of Chasseurs. Right now, they attempted to press forth through the gap in the walls. This granted Ves with a unique opportunity. No matter where he aimed at, he was guaranteed to hit an enemy mech. His lackluster marksmanship wouldn't be much of a detriment in this target-rich environment.

No, the only thing he had to be careful of was the inevitable retaliation. From the way their ranged mechs quickly trained their fire on Lucky when he flew out of the first heavy mech, Ves expected instant retaliation after he fired the first shot.

One of his hands briefly brushed on his stomach where his trusty old shield generator rested. If his Stealth Augment couldn't save him, he at least trusted the shield generator to protect him long enough to get away.

Now that he entered stealth, he had to move quickly in order to take advantage of its short duration. He commanded the floater platform to climb up high in order to obtain a commanding view of the battle.

Once he became satisfied with his position, he extended the Amastendira and gripped it carefully in a two-handed grip. He carefully took the time to aim his weapon before he unleashed the first shot.

The sheer amount of energy passing through the bubble of stealth caused it to fluctuate. The powerful white-hot laser beam immediately caused the mechs of the Chasseurs to bleat out an alarm as the beam struck the back of a swordsman mech trying to press forward.

The beam vaporized the relatively thin layer of uncompressed armor and continued to burn through to strike the mech's power reactor. The component instantly failed, causing the rest of the mech to shutdown.

Ves quickly adjusted his aim and raked the singular powerful beam from the Amastendira through the rear armor of a bunch more mechs. Although he failed to take down another mech, he did manage to startle the Chasseurs into a momentary halt.

The handful of frontline mechs that supported the main push quickly turned around and bombarded the air where his floater platform previously hovered. However, their response was just a tad bit too slow.

Ves wasn't an idiot. As soon as the first shot subsided, he stomped on the floater platform, causing it to initiate an emergency descent. As the invisible bubble of stealth restored around his form, he barely managed to evade the furious volley of fire flying over his head.

The Chasseurs didn't know what they were dealing with. Ves probably figured they thought they faced some kind of powerful stealth bot. Just as they figured they took down the stealth bot, Ves opened fire yet again from another position.

This time, the powerful beam passed through the rear armor of another mech, but failed to hit anything critical. However, the power behind the beam was so strong that it wrecked a lot of internals, to the point where the strength of the mech suddenly dropped by at least a half.

For the subsequent shots, Ves kept the floater platform moving as he fired the Amastendira. While this severely affected his accuracy, the sheer damage and chaos that ensued from his action successfully turned around the battle.

Only after he shot his eighth laser beam did the Chasseurs manage to hit him directly. His shield generator flared up, protecting his body from the explosive

shells that detonated against his form. He yelled in pain from the energies bleeding through the near-impenetrable shield. A wash of heat and force flung him away from the floater platform which the Chasseurs quickly shot into pieces.

Ves tentatively managed to regain control over his altitude with the help of his antigrav clothing. With the loss of the floater platform, he wouldn't be able to fly as fast as before, but at the very least he managed to preserve his life. He quickly checked the charge of his shield generator.

Its charge dropped from eighty percent to a dismal forty-seven percent.

"Damnit, I can't afford to get hit another time!"

Even until now, Ves hadn't been able to recharge his ultra-compact shield generator. This piece of wondrous technology was completely beyond his present capacities. He figured that the only way he could recharge the shield generator was to go back to Leemar, something which he wasn't keen to do before he advanced to Journeyman Mech Designer.

"The shield generator is a lifeline. What will Master Olson think if I come back so soon with a depleted charge?"

Ves could only fire two more full-powered beams, but the damage he caused had reserved the entire trend. He managed to fell five mechs and heavily wound a couple more. The Chasseurs completely lost their imposing manner, while the defenders thought that Ves had deployed some secret trump card.

Now, the only variable that mattered was Sir Ravanac. Would the knight insist on pushing forward, or would he finally decide to pull back?

Chapter 393 Unseen Threa

What the 5th Vavulan Chasseurs didn't know was that Ves almost expended all of his means. His stealth augment almost ran out of power while his pistol could only unleash two more powerful beams.

Ves hoped to fool Sir Ravanac into thinking that he could continue to harass the Chasseurs from the dark. Now that they had just succeeded in hitting Ves, it was important for him to demonstrate that he could continue to pose a threat to their rear.

"My stealth charge has almost run out. I've got to finish this quickly."

He positioned himself at a different angle and elevation and proceeded to fire at the uncertain Chasseurs yet again. This time, the mechs had put up their guards and oriented some mechs to the front. His ninth shot managed to carve through the shield of a knight mech, but failed to inflict significant harm on the mech itself.

Even as he unleashed his shot, his form dove down quickly, allowing him to dodge most of the counterattack, although a volley of rapid-fire laser beams managed to clip his left side, causing the shield generator to whine in protest.

"Thirty-eight percent charge!"

His stealth field was also on the verge of giving up. Without any further thought, Ves snapped his Amastendira for the last time. This time, he chose to shoot Sir Ravanac's mech despite knowing that it wouldn't have much of an effect.

His aim was a little off, and the beam streaked above the fancy mech's head. Ves quickly corrected his aim and slashed the beam downwards until it hit the mech's shoulder blades.

Unfortunately, rear armor or not, the Amastendira's full-powered laser beam only left a shallow furrow inside the plating of compressed armor. The only thing his final shot managed to accomplish was to pull Sir Ravanac away from his fight against the Blackbeaks.

Both knight mechs looked like they had gone through a giant tumbler. One mech lost its shield and had its entire left arm smashed, while the other mech

had its beak flattened while suffering a severely dented leg. Ultimately, the two offensive knights highlighted the shortcomings of their type, which was that they lacked the true resilience of a defensive knight.

"Now, will you decide to pull away or not?" Ves frowned.

Whatever the case, he did not have the luxury to hang around. He quickly dove back behind the wall just before his stealth augment ran out of power. Without any concern for his dignity, Ves quickly dropped down to the ground and ran towards the nearest underground access point.

As Ves sought refuge underground, the battle in the gap had turned into an awkward state. Neither the Chasseurs nor the defenders fought with all of their might. The latter had almost run out of steam while the former kept up their guard for further sneak attacks.

The power exerted by Ves and the difficulty in pinning him down had truly struck a nerve in the minds of the Vesians. They quickly lost a bunch of mechs, which robbed the attackers of much of their energy. Even though they would still be able to break through the defenses, the amount of casualties they'd suffer along the way might quickly reach an unacceptable point.

Even as Sir Ravanac agonized over the decision, the two battered Blackbeaks did not show signs of giving up. Their pilots continued to press on the mace-wielding mech, preventing its pilot from considering the situation with a sober mind.

With much of his raiding force stalled, who knew how many mechs he would lose at the end of this raid. It would be a joke to suffer more losses than their targets.

"These Brighters are too stubborn!"

Why did they fight so hard to preserve a single facility?

The losses that the Chasseurs already sustained put the noble in a difficult spot. He already lost a number of mechs. If he did not achieve any results, his superiors would scorch him over a fire. Yet if he recklessly continued the assault, the cost would become so unbearable that he might get sanctioned over the disaster.

Perhaps the pressure had been too much for him, because Sir Ravanac eventually gave in to his fears. "Pull back!"

In his consideration, it was better to retreat and claim that the intelligence officers screwed up by underestimating the defenses of the facility they were supposed to destroy. At worst, he'd receive a reprimand. He could always regain his honor in subsequent battles.

If he instead pressed on with the attack, he might be able to break the defenders, but he might also lead his unit to a bad end. In that case, the consequences would be much more dire. Losing his knighthood was the worst thing that could happen to him.

Once he lost the protection of his elevated status, his enemies among the Legion would certainly pounce on him. He'd lose everything he'd worked for these past couple of decades.

The Chasseurs slowly receded from the gap. The defenders didn't follow, as they weren't in a state to pursue. Only a third of their mechs still possessed the strength to fight back, which was way too little to pose a significant threat to the diminished Chasseurs.

In order to guard against any further sneak attacks, Sir Ravanac's mech joined the most intact mechs at the rear guard. As the Chasseurs gradually quickened their pace, the defenders realized that they successfully repelled the Vesians.

"We did it! They're gone!"

"What a hell!"

"Where did those laser beams come from?"

As the mechs at the walls celebrated their success, both the Oodis Mudriders and Walter's Whalers experienced the same thing. The Meandering Monkeys completely gave up on their harassment and pulled back to escort the deflated Chasseurs back to their transport ships.

Almost no one could believe they pulled it off. Even as they celebrated their success, they still held a lot of doubts.

"Alright men, knock it off! The Vesians may still change their minds! Start policing the battlefield and make sure to replenish your supplies!"

The different outfits quickly went into action. They retrieved their fallen mechs and pushed aside the hollow wrecks of the Vesian mechs. All of their pilots managed to eject to safety long ago, so the defenders had no scruples about moving them away.

In actuality, the mechs held a lot of value. After handing them over to repair shops, the mechs could be brought back to working condition. The defenders already started contemplating their salvage rights.

This was one of their rights, and while other employers might quibble over how to distribute or retain the wrecks, Ves could care less where they ended up. After a few detours, Ves wearily returned to the command center and watched the center projection for the latest movements.

"Where are the Vesians?"

"The 1st Meandering Monkeys and the 5th Vavulan Chasseurs are in the process of boarding their transports, sir." Someone reported.

"Have they left any mechs behind?"

"Not as far as we are aware of, sir."

Ves worriedly waited for the Vesians to make a move. The worst part about it was that due to the jamming, they couldn't get any detailed or reliable readings of their movements. For all they knew, the Vesians managed to pull the wool over their eyes and maneuvered around for another attack.

"Detecting ship movements! The transports are lifting off!"

Fortunately, some things couldn't be hidden, and the massive amount of power needed to lift a number of transports carrying lots of mechs could be observed from dozens of kilometers away.

"The Vesian mechs are being brought back to orbit!"

Only after the transports climbed past the perennial cloud cover did everyone truly begin to relax. Most of the defending mechs stood down in order to recover from the brief but intense battle.

Out of all the different outfits that took part in the defense, the Oodis Mudriders actually suffered the least. Though they lost a number of mechs at the start, they stopped suffering any major losses once Melkor diverted them to hold the flanks. The Meandering Monkeys never made a serious push.

Both Ves and Melkor scoffed when they heard about how the Mudriders got off light.

"Sanyal-Ablin suffered the most. Out of their twenty-four mechs, only seven of them are still in fighting condition. Five of their pilots lost their lives as well."

"And the Avatars?"

"My men did well enough." Melkor grunted with some amount of satisfaction.

"I'm sorry to say that most of our brand new mechs got wrecked. Some of them can still be salvaged, but the others are a total loss. I'm glad we haven't lost any pilots."

As for the Whalers, Dietrich mentioned that their rookies had flat out performed dismally. The enemy frontline mechs chewed at least a third of their largely uncoordinated force of mechs. It appeared that the Whalers required a lot more time in training in order to become an effective fighting force again.

With victory came the spoils. In the evening, Ves held a brief celebration over barbecue. Mech pilots from every participating outfit mingled together and sang drunken songs. As the rank-and-file forgot about the horror they faced in the afternoon, the leaders gathered together in a quiet conference room, both to debrief them all and to distribute the rewards.

"Sanyal-Ablin, your sacrifice has been noted. Please inform your branch office that I'm ready to transfer the money that you are owed." Ves nodded to the grizzled mech commander that hailed from the security company.

"Next time, beef up your defenses." The commander grumbled.

The bills from SASS would certainly be steep. Ves had pushed them into a position where they had to fight against a military force that outnumbered them by a fair margin. The commander could have easily have decided to give up on defending the Mech Nursery, but his professional pride called him to stand his ground.

Ves respected and appreciated the sacrifice the commander made. Of course, all of the extra money that the LMC owed to the security company would certainly be painful.

After Ves and SASS exchanged their words, Melkor turned to Commander Husaan. "Your Mudriders fared well, but you didn't play that much of a rule."

"Hey! We managed to pin down most of the Meandering Monkeys! Just because they're light mechs doesn't mean they pose no threat!"

"You didn't adjust your deployment once the Monkeys pulled out much of their mechs to face our incoming reinforcements! The Meandering Monkeys managed to pin down your entire mercenary corps while outnumbered two-to-one!"

Melkor's observation put Commander Husaan in a tight spot while Ves quietly sighed. For all their earlier agreements, Husaan still found a way to shirk his duties. While Ves respected the losses they sustained in the initial push, they failed to make any contributions in the rest of the engagement.

"Enough, Melkor." Ves stretched out a hand and intervened. "The Oodis Mudriders haven't contributed as much as we hoped, but we can defer to the terms in the contract in that case. Their final remuneration will certainly take a hit once we run through the compensation formulas."

Though Melkor didn't look like he was done, he deferred to Ves and took a step back. "Fine."

They quickly discussed the performance of the Avatars and the Whalers before carving out the loot. All of those wrecked Vesian mechs became prizes for the taking.

Without any suspense, Sanyal-Ablin received the lion's share of the loot. The Whalers received a modest amount of what remained while the Mudriders only received a handful of the most ruined hulks.

As for the Avatars of Myth, considering that they worked directly for Ves, they had no need to fight over scraps.

"Tomorrow, we'll continue this discussion. By then, the processors will have finished their calculation. We can come to a final agreement on your compensation at that point."

Everyone nodded and left the conference room, leaving Ves alone with Melkor.

"Where's your pet?"

"He hasn't shown up." Ves replied with concern. "I'm not even sure if he's even intact."

"Maybe it just needs some time to recover. That strange cat of yours has a lot of tricks in store. I don't believe it's gone for good."

As Melkor turned to leave the room, Ves scratched his cheek. The LMC managed to survive the raid, though it had reached the brink during the battle. If not for his personal intervention, he wouldn't have managed to bluff the commander into cutting his losses.

"This isn't supposed to happen. Lucky and I can't keep intervening to save my hide."

Ves already planned to enact a lot of changes. First and foremost, he intended to elevate the Avatars of Myth and bolster their numbers to a full company.

"The time for training and adjustment is past. It's time they become a worthy personal force of mine."

Chapter 394 Silver Lining

The local press called the 3rd Imodris Legion's failed attempt to raid the Mech Nursery the Battle for Cloudy Curtain. They certainly had a flair for the dramatic, as the name suggested that the Vesians had been on the cusp of conquering the planet.

Just as everyone thought that the Vesians would stomp the LMC flat, the up-and-coming mech company surprisingly held them off.

Although the outfits hired by the LMC sustained a lot of losses, it became a fact that they actually repelled two Vesian mech companies!

Every citizen in the Freslin area swelled with pride. Their tiny rural planet actually contributed to the war in a splendid war. A company founded by one of their own citizens hadn't flinched against the invaders but instead fought back with endless ferocity!

"Hahaha! Cloudy Curtain still has some teeth! We're more than a bunch of farmers who only know how to cultivate cloud rice!"

"Who said that people from Cloudy Curtain can't fight? We've smacked the Vesians right in the face!"

Compared to the jubilation of the citizens in Freslin, the mood turned much grimmer over at the other side of the planet. Orinoco suffered a substantial loss. Worst of all, it had likely been done by their own side.

The spaceport, the planetary assembly building, all those company headquarters and all kinds of infrastructure turned into hollow craters and fields of debris. Many of the pieces that erupted from the blasts even went on to damage the surrounding structures.

Tragedy swept the entire capital city as emergency services worked day and night to rescue those buried underneath the wreckage.

Although the occupants of the buildings had been warned of the bombs, they only had two minutes of time to evacuate their workplaces, which was much too short for most of them. The only reason why the casualties hadn't surpassed a thousand was because most workers stayed away from work due to the raid.

Blame and recrimination hadn't started flying yet, but the undercurrent already started surging. The political and economic alliance that dominated Cloudy Curtain for so many years started fraying apart as each side blamed the other for setting off the bombs.

"I don't know why you have the shame to show yourself in public! Instead of risking your own lives to fight the Vesians, you blew up your own structures and killed your fellow citizens! If I didn't know any better, you're likely working for the Vesians!"

"Don't point your fingers at me! Our company has suffered the worst of all! What about you? Your company headquarters somehow got away unscathed. Don't think we're clueless about your ambitions. You've always wanted to supplant us over the years. The Vesian raid was the perfect excuse to do us in!"

Throughout the Bright Republic, the 3rd Imodris Legion's shocking raids unsettled the entire Bentheim region. The near-simultaneous raids strained the Mech Corps, which had to choose where to send their forces quickly and in enough numbers to make an impact.

The Mech Corps largely failed.

The raiding forces went in and out as quickly as possible while inflicting as much damage as they could. They mostly struck smaller star systems with barely any defenses. While that meant they only caused a marginal amount of damage, the damage to everyone's morale was enormous.

The 3rd Imodris Legion basically terrorized the entire periphery around the Bentheim System while suffering very few losses. This changed the aspect of the current war, as the citizens of the various rural systems finally realized that even they couldn't escape its horrors.

The Bright Republic moved quickly to support the stricken star systems. Cloudy Curtain was no exception, as a handful of ships arrived from Bentheim to support the disaster relief and begin to rebuild some of the infrastructure on Orinoco.

However, alongside the aid, the Republic also sent out investigators. The self-sabotage incident in Orinoco had become famous throughout the entire state overnight. The power brokers over at the capital city huddled like rats and kept their heads down in front of the ongoing investigation.

When Ves heard about the news, he shook his head. "Whoever set those bombs aren't stupid enough to leave any traces. Those investigators will probably spend a few weeks in Orinoco before they compile a meaningless report and go back to their fancy offices in Bentheim."

"It doesn't change the fact that our political opposition is completely discredited in front of the Republic." Gavin responded. While everyone mourned for the dead and started preparing for the funerals, Gavin and the rest of the Marketing Department already started slobbering over the golden opportunity presented to the LMC. "It doesn't matter who is ultimately responsible, they're all made from the same cloth. The ruling coalition is finished."

Ves nodded. Right now, the White Doves caught the most flack of all. The raid exposed their ideology as an unrealistic fantasy that did not fit at all in the brutal Age of Mechs. Many citizens of Cloudy Curtain also fingered the pacifists as the group that was most likely responsible for setting off the bombs.

"It's all well and good to celebrate over their misfortune, but do you have to publicly lionize our own battle so much?"

Ves had changed his antigrav clothes into a dark, formal suit in order to attend an upcoming funeral. Over a dozen mech pilots died to defend the Mech Nursery, and he owed it to them to pay his respects.

Thus, he found the contrast between the solemnity between the funerals and the exuberant publicizing of their success in the media to be jarring.

It was as if the LMC danced on the graves of the fallen mech pilots in order to score some points from the public.

"Boss, don't let the losses think we've lost. In actual fact, we won. Think of how rare that is! Almost every other raid succeeded in overrunning the other rural star systems and inflicted tens of billions of credits in economic damage. The Bentheim region is bleeding, and they need to be shown a victory to prove they hadn't let the Vesians beat them black and blue!"

"What's being spread on the galactic net is too slanted!"

Right now, the LMC in cooperation with the Bright Republic's propaganda office enthusiastically spread out footage of the battle at the walls. In particular, the Marketing Department edited the footage they released in a way that made the two gold label Blackbeaks of the Avatars of Myth the main stars of the show.

Although their performance had been above and beyond, Ves found the manipulative editing to be a little too much. Their increased prominence came at the cost of recognizing the sacrifices of the other participants in the battle.

"Boss, right now, nobody cares about the dead." Gavin heartlessly replied. "You just have to switch to another news portal to see, hear or read about all the tragedies Imodris has caused. In the midst of all that doom and gloom, the public needs something to cheer about. I don't see why we can't promote our Blackbeak models along the way as well."

Ves eventually relented on the issue. He saw the advantages as well as anybody. Interest in the Blackbeaks exploded once again. The third-party manufacturers received an influx of new orders and the waiting list for the silver label Blackbeaks practically doubled in a matter of days.

In the next week, Ves spent his full time on processing the aftermath of the battle. He attended the solemn funeral. He issued the payments owed to

Sanyal-Ablin and the rest. He also approved plans to repair and strengthen the Mech Nursery's defenses.

All of that flushed down the LMC's liquidity down the toilet. The company spent almost all of its cash to afford

It was a good thing that the Blackbeaks gained prominence again. With the increased sales that resulted from the impromptu marketing campaign, Ves did not worry too much about the company's financial health.

In the end, this was what made the Mech Nursery worth defending. By continuing its operation unabated, they contributed to the war effort in their own way. Its loss would have weakened the Republic, and its preservation represented a rare ray of sunshine in the middle of the doom and gloom that followed the 3rd Imdris Legion's daring raids.

"What is Imodris up to now?"

While the raids had been an astonishing success for the intrepid legion, it hadn't actually inflicted any significant material losses. The Bright Republic's ability to wage war hadn't been impacted at all.

Right now, everyone in the Bentheim region dreaded Lady Amalia. The aggressive heiress was like a poisonous snake who slithered in the back garden of their house. Any attempts to root out her presence failed. She could be hiding anywhere.

It was a good thing that Ves had nothing to do with it. He left the headache-inducing issue to the Mech Corps and resumed his normal operations.

Construction teams swarmed the Mech Nursery and started patching up the gap in the walls. They also filled in all the craters and restored much of the turrets that got destroyed.

People started coming back to work, and offices started to get lively again. Down in the manufacturing floor, the mech technicians quickly restored all of the production lines and resumed their normal production.

Ves even paid a visit to the floor and took some time to fabricate two more gold label Blackbeaks. After an expedited testing process, Ves quickly had them delivered to the Oodis Mudriders.

Even though their performance fell a bit short in the previous battle, Ves still honored the unofficial agreement he made with Commander Husaan. Even though the Mudriders could fall into a black hole for all he cared, Ves would catch a lot of flack if word went out that he stiffed a mercenary corps.

Mercenaries did not take kindly to anyone who withheld their payment.

Once he took care of all of those chores, Ves left his subordinates to process the remaining issues and went back down to his private workshop floor.

He still had a design to complete.

As he stepped back inside his private workshop, he looked around but failed to spot Lucky's presence. He contacted security every day, but none of them had managed to find out where he holed up.

"I hope you're still alright, Lucky."

His cat should still be okay. His entire body incorporated a substantial amount of high-grade Rorach Bone. Its main trait allowed it to repair any broken or missing parts by itself. It did so by siphoning any available energy. This was a very inefficient process though, so it might take months for Lucky to become whole again.

Ves sighed and turned back to his design. He activated a projector that displayed the progress he made so far. While he finished designing every aspect of the mech, it still looked very rough in his eyes.

He still needed to optimize this design.

"Let's get to work."

He put his rifleman mech into a variety of mathematical models and let the processors simulate the outcome of different events. The results revealed various weak points and imperfections that Ves hadn't been aware of when he first drew up the design.

The simulations revealed a lot problems about the laser rifle. Ves designed it in a small and compact package by incorporating an alien crystal. The interaction between the crystal and the rest of the body of the rifle did not go very smoothly.

At the heart of it, the compatibility issues revealed that Ves did not fully understand the alien tech he incorporated into his design.

Ves did not give up on this matter. "I can still make this work."

Several weeks went by as he continuously iterated on his design. The rifleman mech became more polished every day, and while the problems with the crystals embedded into the chest and rifle of the mech persisted, Ves inched closer and closer to a solution.

Sometimes, he took a break in order to get a status update on what was happening up above. Much of it sounded mundane and routine. The Bright Republic moved quickly to shore up the mood of the public, and the 3rd Imodris Legion appeared to have made themselves scarce for the time being.

"There's one thing you should know about, boss." Gavin said after he finished reciting the latest report. "Someone recently licensed your Blackbeak design."

What?

Chapter 395 Licensed

Ever since Ves debuted the Blackbeak BP-A-01, no one showed any interest in licensing the design. The MTA valued its licensing cost at a whopping 3 billion credits. For the same amount of money, a mech manufacturer would be able to afford another mech production line.

Therefore, no company casually licensed someone else's design.

"Who licensed my design?"

"A medium mech manufacturer called Arkadis Mech Design and Production. It's founded by Gillian Arkadis, a twenty-year old veteran in the business."

"A woman?"

"Yeah, and she's an Apprentice Mech Designer as well, just like you. Some of the analysts in the business are really perplexed at her decision. She's a proven mech designer who graduated from the Ansel University of Mech Design, is more than capable of coming up with her own designs that are substantially more polished than your own work."

A graduate of the AUMD meant she was a true insider in the Bentheim mech industry. She wouldn't lack for connections to obtain a favorable licensing agreement from her fellow mentors and alumni.

Ves had been in the business long enough to know that the mech designers connected to the AUMD considered themselves to be the most foremost mech designers of the Republic.

They often treated anyone who graduated from inferior institutions as second-class mech designers.

They also regarded mech designers who became fortunate enough to study at a more prestigious foreign institution with a lot of wariness and apprehension. Many mech designers who originally came from the Bright Republic had

forsaken their old home in favor of trying to make it big in the prosperous Friday Coalition.

Ves happened to enjoy the rare distinction of falling into both of the fore-mentioned categories. Someone like him was something of a pariah in their circles.

So it came as a huge surprise that an AUMD graduate like Mrs. Arkadis decided to license his latest commercial design.

"Send me what you've gathered so far of Arkadis and her company."

Gavin transferred a bunch of files to Ves, who quickly skimmed them over. He did not find anything unusual, but neither did he see any compelling reason why Arkadis would want to work with his Blackbeak.

"All of her products so far are light mechs." Ves noted with emphasis. "She designs a large variety of landbound and aerial light mechs, but none of them have anything to do with the Blackbeak, which falls into the medium weight class. Has her company shown any indications of gearing its production lines into producing the base model?"

"As far as we know, Arkadis Mechs is still in the process of delivering a major order to a large client. Even if they wanted to begin production immediately, they still have to work on their current backlog."

"So we won't know what she's doing with my design until at least a couple of months have passed."

All in all, both Ves and Gavin could only scratch their heads. Ves figured that Mrs. Arkadis might have noticed the charm inherent in the Blackbeak design and wanted to figure out its secrets by working with the license.

"Do you think she's trying to reverse engineer your secret sauce?"

All Ves could respond to that was wish her luck. Without any insight into the X-Factor, she had no chance of replicating his work.

"If it's so easy to copy my work, Elemental Mech Engineering would have already released a Striker variant of the Blackbeak."

Ves did not forget about EME, which entered into a special licensing agreement with the LMC to produce the bronze label Blackbeaks. Ves always had the sense that Andar Neverland, the founder and chief designer of EME, wanted to do the same.

So far, the EME hasn't released anything of the sort even after many months of producing the bronze label mechs. This indicated that Mr. Neverland achieved nothing that was good enough to go public.

"Keep an eye on Mrs. Arkadis and her company. It might be that she only licensed my design on behalf of someone else. Try to find out if anyone else is connected with this event."

"Will do, boss!"

Ves hung up after that and leaned back on his chair. No matter what, the fact that someone licensed his design under normal conditions meant that his prestige enhanced once again.

Many mech designers constantly pumped out new designs every couple of months in the hopes that others picked them up. Entire design studios lived off this kind of business model.

The better the designs, the more they earned. The beauty about running a mech design studio was that it cost almost nothing to design a mech. Sure, the studios had to invest in a lot of infrastructure, but the cost of setting a design studio paled in comparison to setting up a mech production plant.

"That 3 billion credits will come in handy."

Currently, Ves published the Blackbeak under his own name, so all off that money went into his personal accounts. Added on with the money that he already earned from other sources, Ves actually owned a lot more cash than his own company.

Ves had plans for his money, but that could wait until he finished his current project. He hadn't forgotten his main vocation. "I shouldn't get too distracted by all the money flying around. It's great that someone licensed one of my designs, but I can earn a lot more if I sell the mechs myself."

He dove back into his work on optimizing his design. He had become very proficient at this work, so he constantly improved on his design with each subsequent iteration.

At a certain point, every improvement only increased the performance of his rifleman mech by a fraction of a percentage point. The extra work put into further optimization wasn't worth his time anymore, although many other mech designers disagreed.

"I can only continue to perfect my design if I have a lot more manpower and processing capacity at my disposal."

The LMC expanded a lot in terms of production capacity, but its research and development capabilities hadn't progressed beyond a one-man show. The limitations of this approach really started to grate on Ves.

Only the gimmick still showed some problems. While Ves succeeded in stabilizing the operation of the chest crystal, the one embedded into the laser rifle turned out to be a lot more finicky.

It took him an entire week to get the laser rifle to perform up to standard. Ves spent way more time on fixing all of the bugs in his design, but it had all been worth the extra effort.

His rifleman mech looked fast and lethal, exactly the way he liked it. Ves caught all of the major flaws that he knew of. If he wanted to, he could publish his design right now.

He'd be a fool to do so, though.

"I still have to fabricate a prototype."

Even though he subjected his rifleman mech to millions of simulations, all of the modeling couldn't compare to a single physical test.

After making sure his design required no further tweaks as of yet, he saved its latest state and left his private workshop floor.

He first returned to his private office above the ground to handle the paperwork that piled up in his absence. Much of it seemed routine, so Ves quickly processed the documents before calling over Jake to talk business.

"How is the LMC?"

"It's still growing strong." The old man replied. "Our production is bottlenecked by our lack of production lines. I recently became informed that a fellow colleague of yours licensed the Blackbeak design."

It was obvious what he wanted to say. Ves forestalled his words. "You want me to spend my money on another production line, is that it?"

"The company will grow a lot faster with even one additional Benson production line. Lately, there's a lot of demand for these machines. It takes a lot of manual labor to make some of the equipment, so there's a waiting line of several months for their products. If you can lay down an order now, it will save us a lot of time down the road."

His argument had a lot of merit, but Ves quickly declined the request. "I already have plans for my personal funds. For now, The LMC can fund its expansion by reinvesting its profits."

Jake looked disappointed, but he did not have any rights to any money earned by Ves in the first place. He knew it was something of a long shot to peel money away from his boss.

"There is another matter that needs to be discussed. The board of directors wants to convene soon to decide on a couple of important matters. Chief among them is the topic of issuing dividends."

Ves abruptly turned his full attention on Jake. "Dividends, you say?"

"Correct. The Larkinsons and much of the board believe that the Living Mech Corporation is past its initial growth phase. Due to the bottleneck in production and sales, our profits have stabilized as well. Short of investing in more production lines, there isn't any other compelling reason to reinvest all of the company's profits back into itself."

Ves could argue the point. Just because the company's growth had slowed didn't mean it stopped entirely. All of the profits it saved up would eventually be spent on things that would accelerate the company's growth.

Still, Ves knew without Jake needing to say that the Larkinsons hungered for money. With the war going on, they needed as much as they could get in order to support the careers of the Larkinsons in active duty.

As a Larkinson himself, Ves was sympathetic to their demands. He did not oppose the act of issuing dividends in principle, but Ves did not wish for the other shareholders to be too greedy about the matter.

"Tell the board that I'll be present when it next convenes." Ves nodded to Jake. "Tell them that I'm not against this suggestion, but they can forget about it if they want the LMC to hand out most of its profits to its shareholders."

If the LMC stopped investing in new production lines and instead gave away its profits to its shareholders, then the company would become stagnant eventually reach a dead end.

As the majority shareholder, Ves stood to earn most of the dividends, but the last thing he needed was more cash.

After discussing these matters, Ves left his office and went back underground. This time, he entered the fabrication floor and approached Chief Cyril.

"Chief, please schedule the Dortmund production line for my own use. I'm almost ready to fabricate the prototype of my next design."

The chief whistled in appreciation. "You're truly ready to move on to this stage?"

"Do you think it's too late? Or too soon?"

"There is no sense of late or soon in the mech business. You're done when you're done. No one else can make that decision for you. Certainly, in a perfect universe, mech designers have access to an unlimited amount of resources to polish their design until it shines like a sun. But we don't live in that universe."

Ves agreed. "I hate to say it, but sometimes we can only make do with 'good enough'. I don't have the resources to go much further at this point."

They proceeded to prepare for the upcoming fabrication project. Each new design brought its own challenges. In order to minimize the chances of failure, Ves had to spend at least a couple of days of simulating the fabrication process to see whether he could nail all of the critical parts.

He didn't spend these extra days in vain, because Ves also had to order a substantial amount of resources unique to his second original design.

Once the new shipment of raw materials arrived at the Mech Nursery, Ves readied himself to reproduce the design of his dreams.

"I hope it works. I know it can work. It has to work."

Chapter 396 Engineering Challenge

"Why can't I get it to work?"

Ves stood stumped in front of the 3D printer as he halted his fabrication efforts. The other mech technicians who watched from the sidelines couldn't help him either.

Initially, fabricating the components for the prototype went smoothly. Ves already practiced fabricating the most tricky parts, and much of the components used familiar materials employed in his other designs.

The HRF armor plating posed no difficulty at all, although Ves found its lengthy fabrication time to be a drag. It couldn't be helped, as the formula key draw was to refine a lot of cheap materials into effective armor plating. Transforming all of those raw materials took time that even the best machines couldn't hurry up.

As for the now-familiar Veltrex formula, Ves knew all of its nuances inside and out. Parts which other mech technicians might struggle with came out of the Dortmund production line with ease.

To be sure of their integrity, Ves scanned each and every part with his Vulcaneye scanner. Even a deviation of 0.1 percent led him to scrap the entire part entirely and force him to fabricate another copy.

Mechs could tolerate a lot of deviances, but just because Ves could clunk some sloppy parts together didn't mean it would fly in the market. The MTA strictly certified every mech sold in the open market because they disapproved of the practice.

Ves stuck to a higher standard, so he was even stricter to himself than the MTA.

The only unforeseen problem came when he fabricated the two light crystals. As the gimmicks of his second original design, the crystals needed to be

attention-grabbing and unique. In order to amplify their performance, Ves stretched their physical attributes to the limit of what he could make.

The smaller crystal posed fewer problems. The main challenge with this smaller sample came when Ves tried to assemble the laser rifle. Even though it was scaled to the size of a mech, some portions required extreme precision, and that was exactly the case with the smaller crystal.

"Still, anyone can assemble this rifle with enough practice." He determined after he fumbled around until he got the rifle to take on its intended form.

The big crystal rested on the chest of his hunched mech. Though the mech's posture made the crystal a bit less prominent than he originally intended, it would still be able to mitigate energy attacks from the front. Any laser beams that strayed close to the chest would partially lose their efficacy in the vicinity of this crystal.

The problem with this big one was that it was extremely hard to reproduce. It required a perfect environment and a flawless machine in order to recreate a large enough crystal.

It always worked when Ves practiced its fabrication in a virtual environment. He worked under perfect conditions back then. Right now, Ves already ruined his forth big crystal. He looked in dismay as the Dortmund printer spat out a huge crystal that was larger than his body but displayed a very large crack on its surface.

"This is why you need to test out your designs for real." Chief Cyril said as he stepped forward until he stood next to Ves. "More complex mechs sometimes come with hundreds of tiny issues that aren't apparent during the modelling phases. Especially with weird stuff like these crystals. This is alien technology, right? Those fancy models of yours probably can't wrap their math around its attributes."

"You have a point." Ves conceded. "The smaller crystal is close enough to what I've reproduced in my lab to work. This bigger one is a different story."

He never physically fabricated a crystal of this size before. He vastly underestimated the actual difficulty involved in creating such a monstrosity. He thought it wouldn't be so troublesome to scale up a crystal according to his current understanding of the alien crystal technology.

Ves discretely turned his attention inward. "Can you do anything to help?"

The spirit of the crystal golem barely communicated back. Even though it was a complete spirit, it did not retain too much knowledge from its predecessor. It retained a lot of knowledge in some fields, but possessed huge gaps in many other areas.

"Do you think it's a problem with my design or a problem with the working environment?"

The chief scratched his head. "I'm not sure, but my gut tells me that reproducing the crystal is pushing beyond the limits of the capabilities of the Dortmund printer. It's like trying to cook a traditional meal without a kitchen."

The manufacturing of mechs and its components always centered around the design, the materials and the hardware. All three of these points needed to be satisfied in order to produce a good mech.

Right now, Ves encountered a shortcoming in the one area which he had never really worried about before. The formidable Dortmund printer which Ves relied on to produce his mechs for the next generation started to reach its limits.

Now that they recognized the problem, they could work on coming up with a solution.

"Maybe you should scale back your ambitious design. Do you really have to include such a huge crystal?"

Ves pursed his lips. "I can make some compromises on its size for the bronze and silver label variants, but the gold label mech is my poster model for this product line. It can't under-deliver on its promises."

"That's the trouble with gimmicks. It all sounds well and good, but when you try to turn them into reality, you begin to realize that they're called gimmicks for a reason. Anything that's good enough to be included in a standard design don't come with so many issues."

He basically faced two options right now. Either he could scale back his gimmick, or he could try to find a workaround for his problems.

"There shouldn't be a problem with the concept. It's only our hardware that's failing us." Ves summed up. "Problems with engineering can be solved with engineering."

Cyril snorted. "That's easier said than done. What do you want to do? Improve the Dortmund printer? You don't understand a thing about how it works."

"That's true. I'm thinking about using an entirely different approach to create the crystals. When you think about it, using a 3D printer to fabricate a crystal is like using a feather to hammer a nail. It's the wrong tool for the job."

The insights provided by the crystal golem revealed that his former race utilized an entirely different method to make their crystals. Human fabrication technology predominantly pieced the crystals together at an extremely microscopic level, while the extinct aliens essentially grew the crystals in a more organic manner.

Ves could go on and on about the technical details, but the basic solution would be to imitate the alien race's method of production by creating a customized, homebrew synthesizer.

"Instead of making our own machines, why not buy an existing one?"

"They won't be tuned to create the kind of crystals I want." Ves shook his head. "I already looked it up in case I can simplify the production of the crystals. There's no easy solution out there."

The machines that met his standard could only be obtained from second-rate states such as the Friday Coalition. He could get his hands on a basic machine that fit his needs for the ludicrous price of 100 merits.

He would rather make his own machine than to cough up that much merits at once.

"Do you even know how to make your own machine?"

"I've never made one before, but I already have a framework in mind. With my understanding of alien technology, I can probably kludge something together that works."

Even if Ves specialized in designing mechs, he possessed a broad breadth of knowledge that would not lose out to any of the engineers working at equipment manufacturers like Benson Industrial Machinery.

He only lacked practice and familiarity with industry-specific methods, but Ves had become somewhat familiar with the makeup of these kinds of machines. He personally worked on reconstructing the Dortmund printer by hand so he wasn't working from scratch.

"How much time and effort will this take, though?" Chief Cyril asked a very pertinent question. "If it takes a couple of months or more to design a tailor-made synthesizer, aren't you better off with an off-the-shelf machine?"

Ves faced a lot of time pressure as well. With everything that happened so far, the war between the two states risked becoming super-heated at any

moment. Ves really wanted to finish his current design project before that happened.

He tried to estimate how much time and effort he needed to put in the design and creation of the crystal synthesizer. "Most of the technology involved is readily available. I only need to design fabricate some custom modules in order to accommodate the alien technology. It's going to take some time, but not that much."

Most importantly, Ves did not intend to work by himself this time. In a project like this that fell out of his expertise, he figured that soliciting everyone's advice couldn't hurt.

The entire Production Department led by the Chief and Carlos started rotating in different shifts. They looked on as Ves designed a crystal synthesizer in front of their eyes. He already had a good idea on how it should look like, but he felt much less certain about some of the details.

He couldn't hope for the mech technicians to understand the entire machine, but their puzzlement guided Ves into a deeper understanding of what he did. Sometimes, they pointed out a couple of faults that Ves had overlooked, which saved him a lot of time down the road.

Five days went by as this open process continued. Both Ves and the mech technicians gained a lot out of this exchange. On the sixth day, Ves felt the crystal synthesizer's design looked good enough to reproduce.

"I don't fully understand how it works, but even I can see it doesn't come cheap." Chief Cyril spoke as he inspected the final design for anything else they overlooked. "Unlike with mechs, you can't put it in a simulation and see whether it works."

Ves and the LMC lacked the right mathematical models to do so. As a company that mainly produced mechs, it had no business with designing and

producing its own production equipment. Ves would have to sacrifice a lot to get his hands on the right models.

He would rather save himself the trouble and create the synthesizer on the spot. It was sloppy, but it worked.

"I think the cost of the raw materials alone will amount to about 250 million credits."

That was not a light sum, but the LMC could handle the cost. Ves only needed one of them in order to enable the LMC to mass produce the crystals necessary for his design.

Ves used the Dortmund printer to fabricate the components. He then moved on to the assembler to piece the synthesizer together.

Naturally, he did not fully rely on the machines to do all the work. For some of the more delicate components, he put them together by hand. At each step, he verified the assembly by scanning his work with his Vulcaneye. Any deviations from his design could prove costly, so Ves was very meticulous about the assembly.

A couple of days later, a crystal synthesizer half the size of a massive industrial printer rested in the corner of the Dortmund hall. After an extensive round of checks, Ves fed the synthesizer with the necessary materials to produce a big crystal.

After a couple of hours of work, the machine spat out a crystal with a multiple cracks on its surface.

Ves, Carlos and Chief Cyril looked at each other in dismay.

"Maybe it's just some teething troubles."

They put the synthesizer to the test and let it grow more than ten crystals in a row.

Five of them came with enormous cracks. Three of them looked fine to the naked eye, but when they scanned the crystals, they discovered numerous micro fractures.

Only two of the crystals met the standard.

What now?

Chapter 397 Recovery

"An eighteen percent success rate doesn't sound so bad." Carlos remarked from behind. "How much does it cost to grow one of these crystals?"

Ves quickly estimated the costs. "A couple of million credits due to all of the exotics. This specific composition is meant to be cheaper than the original substance."

"Can we recycle the failed products?"

They quickly investigated the failures and it turned out that salvagers could recover much of the value. It required special processes only available to professionals, so the LMC would lose a fair bit of money in the exchange.

However, at least they wouldn't lose tens of millions of credits on this entire endeavor.

To Ves, that was good enough. "I don't have the time to perfect the synthesizer. We'll just have to make due with what we have."

Right now, he wanted to move past this obstacle and finish assembling the prototype. The importance of finishing his rifleman mech design trumped any other considerations. He could always work on the synthesizer later.

He set one of the flawless crystals into the only remaining cavity inside the mostly-assembled prototype. After making all of the connections, the crystal appeared to be functional, but whether it truly worked remained to be seen.

With the installation of the central crystal, Ves only needed to wrap up a couple of matters to finish the prototype. When Ves stepped back from his completed work, he began to admire the vision he brought to life, if only partially.

Its hunched humanoid form and mottled green-brown coating gave it a sense that it thrived out of the spotlight. It functioned great on its own, but it showed its true value when employed alongside other mechs.

The entire frame looked sleek and slim for a medium mech, and the smaller-than-average laser rifle only reinforced that impression. The only sacrifice to this form factor was its backpack module which Ves had included by default. Without it, his rifleman mech wouldn't be able to change its external battie.

The entire Production Department drooled over the prototype. They knew what a monumental work it represented, and what kind of effort Ves had put into its design. Although the final design might look a bit different from this early copy, they already started imagining this mech on the field.

How would it perform? What kind of mech pilots did this mech appeal to? Will it sell any hotter than the Blackbeak?

"It looks like an alien."

"That's because it's based on a dead race."

The thing that creeped the mech technicians out the most was the weird head. It was basically a ball with holes spread evenly onto its surface. While that didn't do any favors to its structural integrity, its unsettling appearance emanated a faint psychological pressure.

Combined with the incomplete X-Factor, and anyone who gazed upon the mech would be taken aback.

Some time later, Chief Cyril asked Ves where he wanted to put the prototype to its paces.

"We recently worked on setting up our own testing grounds. The recent raid has pushed its completion back, but we imported enough equipment to perform at least basic tests. I think it's best if we do the testing in-house rather than send it to the APMTG like last time."

Sending it to a dedicated testing grounds would make sure that Ves gathered the most extensive amount of data. However, the same data might also get leaked.

"I'm not sure the prototype even works as expected." Ves said with a sigh.

"Before we proceed to the most demanding tests, we should first find out if the mech works at all. Basic testing will do for now. There's no need to put it on a ship to Bentheim."

Designing a rifleman mech differed a lot from designing a knight. When Ves designed the Blackbeak, he benefited from the fact that the type was one of the most mechanically simplistic mech types in existence. It featured relatively few complex systems and did not demand too much precision.

A knight only needed to be tough and durable in order to work.

Rifleman mechs made use of a lot more systems, all of which needed to mesh well with each other. A fault in one system might result in a knock-on effect on adjacent systems and so on. In the worst case scenario, a catastrophic fault might even lock up the entire mech in the middle of a battle.

Therefore, Ves already readied himself for a more extensive testing phase. He planned to fabricate at least one more prototype in order to make sure his changes hadn't proven detrimental to the design.

"Alright, let's bring out out to the testing grounds."

Ves did not personally plan to attend the entire test this time. He off-loaded the work to the LMC and only made sure they measured the things he wanted to know, such as the performance of the two crystals.

"Who shall be its test pilot?"

Ves was tempted to call up Melkor, but figured that it might be a bit too premature for him to get familiar with his latest design. Instead, he ordered someone else from the Avatars of Myth to take up that duty instead.

A professional testing ground employed specially trained test pilots who knew how to push their mechs to the limit without breaking them. The LMC's testing grounds enjoyed no such luxury, but everyone made due with what they got.

In the meantime, Ves took a rare break from his work and tried to locate Lucky. His cat hadn't shown up at all since the raid, causing him to fret over the health of his feline companion many times.

He figured that Lucky hadn't gone very far from the Mech Nursery, so walked the entire perimeter with his Vulcaneye pointing down at the ground. Although it didn't specialize in it, the multiscanner offered him the ability to sweep a wide area for specific signals.

Ves programmed in the attributes of Rorach's Bone and began to walk back and forth along the grounds. Although the scanner wouldn't be able to penetrate more than a couple of kilometers underground, its current reach was much better than every other scanner in his possession.

After half a day of searching the area close to the former gap in the walls, the Vulcaneye let out a loud beep.

"Found you!"

The scanner's readout revealed a very strong signal that matched the profile of high-grade Rorach's Bone more than one kilometer underground. Ves marked the spot and called up a digging team from the security garrison.

The people of Sanyal-Ablin came equipped with a person-sized digger module. It started to drill through the ground by itself under the supervision of a security tech. Twenty minutes later, the digger module reached Lucky's presumed location.

Once the digger module climbed back up to the tunnel, it carried a very sad-looking Lucky.

"Meow..."

The cat had seen better days. His formerly milky-white body took on a grey and lifeless shade. His back had a nasty hole that only just started closing up with the help of the self-repairing properties of Rorach's Bone.

"Lucky!" Ves picked up Lucky and hugged him against his chest. "You don't have to repair your body by yourself. Let me help!"

Ves quickly brought Lucky's damaged body back and tried several ways to hurry up the repair process. He fed Lucky with a bunch of exotics and attempted to transfer energy directly to his body.

It didn't work as well as he hoped. Somehow, Lucky couldn't take on energy directly. He ran on something different than normal, and the only way to get it was by digesting high-value minerals.

Feeding Lucky worked better, but the cat didn't display much of an appetite this time. It was as if his stomach could only digest so much in his damaged state.

"Rest well, Lucky. I hope you get back up."

"Meow.."

Lucky risked his life to save the Mech Nursery from destruction. Though the price was heavy, they eventually came out on top. Lucky would recover, which was more than he could say for his shield generator. With less than fifty percent charge left, Ves could ill afford another risky move.

Thinking about the money piled up in his bank account, Ves finally decided to expand the Avatars of Myth. He tracked down Melkor at the mech stables of the Avatars. Melkor had just wrapped up a training session with his subordinates and was about to turn in for the day until he spotted Ves.

"It's time."

"Time for what?"

"Time to turn the Avatars into a full-blown fighting force. Is your cadre ready?"

Melkor had been waiting for this day. "We still need to work on our team tactics, but we got the basic coordination down. It's a good thing we haven't lost any pilots from the previous battle. Fighting the Vesians head-to-head has instead boosted our esprit-de-corps. The men and women under my command already developed a sense of purpose and belonging."

"That sounds great!" Ves replied. The more his mech pilots felt like they belonged, the more they were willing to risk their lives for him. Loyalty always took a lot of effort to foster. "In the next half year, I want the Avatars to scale up to a company-sized force. I want at least forty mechs and a matching amount of ships."

"It's not that easy to get our hands on some ships, and we need a no-nonsense captain to keep them under our thumb."

"I already have a captain in mind. Don't worry about that. I'd like to hear your opinions on what kind of ships we need to buy. Although I'm flush with cash right now, I can't afford to splurge on a combat carrier."

Melkor looked disappointed at that. It was the dream of every mech force to be brought from star to star with a purpose-built combat vessel. Naturally, both of them would never dream of acquiring a fleet carrier. Only entire states could afford to procure or construct such massive ships.

Let alone the construction costs, Ves couldn't even bear the running costs of owning a capital ship. The amount money spent on fuel, supplies, salaries and more would bankrupt him within a couple of years.

Even the more modestly sized combat carriers fell out of consideration. At this stage, Ves reluctantly let go of trying to own a well-armored ship and started to consider more modest ships.

"With our current budget, we can consider two possible options." Melkor spoke up after some thought. "We can either go cheap and snap up a couple of old cargo haulers that have been converted to mech carriers, or we can spend a lot more to buy carriers that have been built for this purpose from the start."

A step down from combat carriers would be the so-called light carriers. This used to be an informal designation for any private sector vessel that had been designed to convey mechs for mercenaries and the like.

They largely featured the same civilian-grade armor as the cargo haulers, but with thicker layers. They also featured much more reinforced structure and more hardened ship components.

All in all, light carriers formed the best choice of conveyance among the stars for a personal force like the Avatars of Myth.

The only problem was price.

"Those ships don't come cheap. Even a basic one can cost a billion credits." Ves replied. He already did his research beforehand. "Compared to a beat-up cargo hauler that some shipyard rearranged into a carrier, the costs are much

more generous. A fully functional one can be bought for 200 million credits, while a less reliable one can be had for fifty million credits or less."

Prices varied wildly in terms of age, quality, model, size and more. The smallest mercenary corps often couldn't be picky, and chose to traverse the stars with dubious-looking rust buckets akin to the Happy Jelly owned by the Whalers.

Thinking about that old and decaying ship prompted Ves to wince. He did not wish his Avatars to ride on such awful carriers.

"Let's go for the light carriers. I can afford the expense, if only barely. It's worth the investment."

After making their choice, they started picking the right model of ships.

Chapter 398 Light Carrier

Ves felt as if he turned back to three and looked at a catalogue of model starships. Even though Ves developed a love for mechs early on, he also enjoyed other marvels. What kind of kid didn't fantasize about gallivanting across the galaxy in a modern and fully crewed starship?

As the owner of the Barracuda, Ves enjoyed owning the sleek corvette, even if he hadn't traveled on it all that much.

It was the thought that counted. He could always rely on a quick getaway as long as he owned his own vessel. Many others couldn't say the same.

From the Age of Stars, humanity became increasingly more dependent on starships to run their entire society. A single planet could never fulfill the needs of its citizen on its own. Not in the long run.

During the Age of Conquest, humanity aggressively developed bigger and better starships. The states that emerged during this time measured their military might against the aliens and each other by the size of their navies.

Armed warships began to become more prolific during this time. With the development and proliferation of capital warships, weapons scaled to become more destructive as well.

With some cannons capable of cracking entire moons, warships increasingly lost their allure and turned into objects of fear.

By the time the Age of Mechs came to pass, the Common Fleet Alliance worked hard to remove the dread and stigma associated with warships. They disappeared from the public eye, whereupon weapon-less starships began to make a comeback.

With the ascendancy of mechs, a demand emerged for starships equipped to accommodate mechs instead of general heavy equipment. Mechs packed into standard-sized containers still fit fine in all sorts of cargo haulers and transports, but mech forces couldn't be bothered with packing and unpacking their mechs in the middle of a warzone.

"We need ships that can launch and retrieve mechs immediately."

Mech carriers emerged from two different strains. Ship designers modified the classic assault carrier designs that used to convey infantry or tank units from planet to planet. Mechs required a lot more vertical space in the hangar and launch bays, so the first combat carriers quickly became very expensive.

Since such expensive vessels were out of reach for most private sector outfits, many clever ship designers started taking old, decommissioned hulls and converted them into improvised mech carriers.

These carriers converted from old cargo haulers and all kinds of other starships with large cargo bays didn't seem very reliable, but they did the job without breaking the bank, and that was what mattered the most.

Of course, Ves would not consider buying these rust buckets. He could afford something much better.

In between converted carriers and combat carriers existed a special ship classification called light carriers. It basically took the best of the two former classes and combined them into an economic but somewhat capable ship class that was the favorite of medium and large-sized outfits everywhere.

Ship designers utilized thick plates cheap civilian-grade ship armor and a highly reinforced internal structure and hull. This gave the light carriers a lot more resilience in direct battle, though they would never be able to withstand the amount of punishment that combat carriers could endure.

More importantly to Ves, light carriers utilized their internal volume much more efficiently compared to converted carriers. The former had been designed from the ground up to accommodate mechs, while the latter only tacked on that feature afterwards.

"We're going to need two big ones or three smaller ones." Melkor stated as they sat behind a console and stared at a projection of commercial starships. "With forty mechs, give or take a few, it's very difficult to find a good ship that can fit twenty mechs at once."

Ves nodded next to him as he navigated through the virtual portal. He narrowed down the selection of the catalog to light carriers that fell within his budget.

Every light carrier that fit twenty mechs cost at least more than 2 billion credits.

Even if Ves could afford such hardware, he almost had a heart attack when he saw the prices.

"These prices ramp up really fast! A light carrier that fits fifteen mechs only costs a bit more than 1.3 million credits right now!"

This meant that Ves would be better off buying three smaller carriers than two bigger ones. He would have to spend at least 4 billion credits to accommodate

forty mechs, but he could also pay 3.9 billion credits to fit forty-five mechs instead.

The latter seemed like a better deal overall until he realized that he needed to pay for the upkeep of three ships instead of two.

"Three ships allow us to bring more spare mechs or supplies, but it's going to be difficult finding good crew for all of them at this time." Melkor noted. "You're the boss, Ves. I'm fine with whatever you decide."

It depended on what Ves demanded from the Avatars of Myth. He initially established them because he wanted to stop relying on other forces for protection. He wanted to command over his own force of mechs that he could rely on to accompany him through these tumultuous times.

Ves weighed the matter and came to a decision. "I think it's best to stick with two light carriers for now. Right now, it's a bit too troublesome to get three new ships up-and-running in a short amount of time. These larger carriers may be bigger and more expensive, but they bring more benefits as well."

The bigger ships not only carried more mechs, but they also offered larger workshops and cargo holds. The extra storage would especially come in handy in expeditions that involved resource extraction.

In order to drive down the cost, the smaller carriers squeezed as much space for mechs as possible, leaving very little room for other cargo.

"It's a good choice in the long run." Melkor nodded. "Look at this model. The L'Aquitaine Shipyards Asperion Mark IX."

The Asperion Mark IX cost 2.3 billion credits, but for a ship that carried twenty mechs, it came with additional bonuses above the bare models. The Asperion in particular came with powerful thrusters seemed geared for quick landings and takeoffs.

"It's a very good ship model when you want to deploy in an active warzone, but it's not what I'm looking for. All of that performance comes with awful fuel economy and shorter range. It's a good ship for warmongering mercenary corps, but I'm looking for something with more reach."

Ves wanted a ship model that could match the extensive ship range of the Barracuda. This would help a lot if Ves ever wanted to go on a distant expedition.

The pair browsed the catalog a little more and found another noteworthy ship model. Melkor zoomed in on the Consolidated Starship Design and Assembly's latest light carrier, the Remar Martis ICG-7F.

"This Remar Martis has the best range out of the list. It's incredibly fuel efficient and comes with larger fuel tanks as well. While it won't be able to match the Barracuda's reach completely, it definitely comes close."

"Hmmm..." Ves mused as he inspected the specs. "The range is good, but I can't say the same for everything else."

"You're right. I wouldn't bring the Remar Martis anywhere near a fight."

The ship designers working for CSDA prioritized range and fuel economy over protection and cargo space. That might not sound so bad, but the ship cost 2.7 billion credits, which was way too overpriced in his eyes.

As a mech designer by profession, he could recognize when he was being ripped off. CSDA marketed the Remar Martis for its range and fuel economy, but in truth it didn't cost that much to produce this model.

Just with mechs, armor cost the most of all. No matter how sophisticated the engine and other internal components, they didn't cost nearly as much as an extra layer of armor plating.

"Let's look for ships with balanced specs. I think every aspect is important."

He wasn't stupid enough to pick a perfectly balanced ship. Boring ship models like that compromised on anything. Ves still sought a ship with more extensive range, but not at the cost of everything else.

After an hour of scouring through the catalog, they came across an uncommon ship model from an obscure foreign shipyard that exported its products to the Republic.

The KSG Naval Works Trieste TRLC-343 fit all of their criteria. The model possessed a generous range while managing to avoid skimping on armor and cargo space. However, the light carrier was a little larger than most, and came with a pretty high price tag of 2.6 billion dollars each.

Ves fell in love with the Trieste designs. The smooth curved contours of the ship complimented the sleek Barracuda, and the ship came with the biggest workshop compartment he had ever seen.

"The cost is a little much, but I can afford them if I want to. What do you think, Melkor?"

"I'm fine if you want something cheaper. The capabilities of the TRLC-343 look very good, but we can still opt for three smaller carriers if you want to save on money."

Ves shook his head. "This is an investment for the future. I think it's a mistake to skimp out on something as good as this. Let's make this our first choice."

The Trieste seemed really good, but a couple of other models came close while demanding a bit less money. With a selection of five different ship models, Ves decided to make his selection and place an order later.

"Let me first send this list to Captain Silvestra. As a ship captain herself, she might be able to point out shortcomings that we haven't spotted."

It would be a mistake to base a major purchase on the spec sheets alone. As Ves very well knew, many qualities of a product simply couldn't be fit into a set of numbers.

After he sent a brief to the captain of the Barracuda, Ves and Melkor moved on to expanding their roster of mechs.

"If I decide to place an order for two Trieste-class light carriers, I won't have enough money left to acquire thirty-one mechs at once. Not if I want to leave some room for upkeep."

Even with his recent windfalls, Ves did not earn all that much in a personal capacity. He drew practically no salary from the LMC as the founder, CEO and chairman of his own company, mainly because he never bothered to do anything about it. Even if he decided to open the dividend spigot in the next board meeting, Ves still came up short.

Melkor showed his understanding. "The Avatars of Myth doesn't need forty mechs at once. It will take time to find some promising recruits and train them to a level where they can be of use. I would much prefer it if you place an order for those carriers as soon as possible, because shipyards tend to take a long time to assemble and deliver them to their customers if they're made to order."

"You're right. The Trieste is made to order. Right now, KSG Naval Works has a waiting list of four months."

Ves held a lot of money, but it seemed that he always found himself penniless after another bout of spending.

"That's the price of power in this galaxy." Melkor said. His lips curled up in a rueful smile. "Small figures like me can't even dream about spending this kind of cash. I really envy you, Ves. Between piloting mechs and designing them, I would have gone for the latter if I knew you could earn this much money."

"Hahahaha!" Ves couldn't control himself and laughed. "That's the funniest thing I've ever heard. I used to dream about becoming nothing more than a mech pilot!"

Both of them chuckled at each other. They both knew that they weren't entirely serious.

Ves achieved much more as a mech designer than he would ever achieve as a mech pilot. Melkor was a true Larkinson who could keep a cool head on the battlefield, but wouldn't know what to do in the workshop or behind the counter of a store.

"I have a good feeling about the Trieste. They're pricey, but they're also beasts. It's best to invest in them early in order to get them ready for anything that can happen in the future."

"You're the one who's paying, Ves. Just keep in mind that most outfits don't spend nearly as much money on a pair of ships."

Chapter 399 Three Problems

Ves returned to his penthouse office after finishing his discussions on expanding the Avatars of Myth. Considering the vast nature of their current expansion, it wasn't possible to expand their fighting strength to forty mechs within six months.

"It will probably take a year, if not more." He guessed. "These things take time."

If he wanted to, he could hire a mercenary corps instead, but that would be a huge mistake. They only ever cared about themselves. By establishing his own outfit, Ves would be certain that its power belonged to him and no one.

He threw himself back to his work. With the prototype still undergoing tests at the nearby testing grounds, Ves wanted to take care of any other matters that

he neglected as of late. He turned on his terminal and went through the recent reports sent in his direction.

"Local politics, bah."

The self-bombing incident of Orinoco provoked an enormous amount of outrage. If the citizens of Cloudy Curtain seemed mad, then the rest of the Republic were absolutely head-over-heels about this incident. If not for the valiant defense at the Mech Nursery, the reputation of the entire planet would have already plummeted to the bottom.

Ves briefly skimmed the recent events. The investigators from Bentheim hadn't found any proof that led to the ones responsible for the devastation, but that didn't help the White Doves very much. Everyone pretty much assumed they did it because it fit their ideology the best.

Naturally, the spokespersons of the pacifists vehemently denied the accusations, but even their strongest supporters started to waver. The White Doves went into full crisis mode in order to stem the bleeding. Whether they would survive at the end of the day or not, nobody knew.

"They survived this far without any problem. I don't believe they can be felled by a single crisis."

Many citizens still wanted nothing to do with the war and the wider galaxy. The recent horrors taught some people that they couldn't bury their heads in the sand, but it prompted even more people to bury their heads even deeper.

In her report, Calsie predicted that the White Doves would eventually find their footing with the radicals among their circle.

What this meant for Cloudy Curtain as a whole, neither Ves nor Calsie didn't dare to make any predictions. One thing was for sure. The LMC's influence had reached new heights. On both an economic and societal level, the

company became a steady fixture in the minds of everyone who lived on the rural planet.

That wasn't too shabby for a company founded around two years ago.

Ves turned back to his paperwork and went through all the other reports. The company's financial picture looked better than before. All of the recent spending put the company's financial health in a dangerous position for a time, but the LMC quickly climbed out of the hole with the help of increased demand for bronze label Blackbeaks.

People bought them because they admired the battle footage of the two gold label Blackbeaks. The Marketing Department's excessive promotion seemed to be in poor taste to Ves, but the public couldn't get enough.

Since gold and silver label Blackbeaks were hard to get, buyers turned instead to the third-party manufacturers to get a quick fix. EME even instituted a waiting list again as they received an unanticipated influx of orders.

Vaun Industrial also enjoyed a small boost in sales, though the effect was much less pronounced. Foreigners didn't care too much about the Bright-Vesia Wars. Anyone watching the generational conflict from the sidelines thought that nothing substantial happened during these wars because the border between the two states never shifted very much after the end of each war.

"Countless mechs are destroyed and hundreds of thousands of mech pilots die in each and every war. The stars will be dyed with blood by the time this latest war will end."

When Ves read the reports, he spotted signs of an impending mobilization order. The Bright Republic had only switched to half a war footing right now. They hadn't mobilized nearly as much manpower and assets as they could have because it took time to organize everything.

So instead, the Bright Republic stretched out the process in multiple steps. Right now, the reports suggested that the Mech Corps had almost finished mobilizing what could be brought to bear within the short-term.

In the first wave, they would certainly call up a large number of reservists, including many mech designers. Many of them would move on to supporting the Mech Corps in the rear but close to the frontlines.

Ves believed that a mech designer like him escaped that fate. Someone of his stature would probably be called up the second wave, which would happen a little later but was not too long away.

"I have to publish my rifleman mech design before that happens. Even among mech designers, there's a large difference between those who published a single commercially successful design compared to those who published more."

Publishing multiple successful designs enhanced his prestige, which improved his odds of landing a cozy assignment. It could mean the difference between mindless number crunching to actual design work.

Ves tentatively resolved to complete his design within a month, which actually shortened his time to a few weeks because his design also had to go through the MTA's validation process.

"There's barely enough time for me to squeeze in another prototype."

He already had to hurry up the process and cut some corners in order to finish his second design in a reasonable time frame.

Several days went by as Ves reacquainted himself with his company. Besides holing up in his office, he also held meetings with the heads of each department. Ves got a much better picture of the current state of the LMC after listening to the people in charge of its various aspects.

All of them made some early preparations for the coming release of the company's second product line. The market for rifleman mechs was very competitive, so the Marketing Department carried the heaviest burden of all.

"Are you confident you can drum up demand for my second design?" Ves asked Gavin.

"Oh, it's dead easy as long as your design performs within expectation. We can sell a dead rat as long as it has some good points!"

Gavin's words reminded Ves that his design might not match the expectations placed upon it. Even as he fabricated the prototype, Ves got a sense that the mech had been a little discordant.

At the end of the testing period, the results finally came in. Ves received an extensive written report along with countless logs and a lot of recordings. Carlos, who had been supervising the test, visited Ves in his office in person.

"I can already tell on the look on your face that the news isn't good."

"The prototype is largely sound, except for one annoying aspect."

"Let me guess. It's the gimmicks, right?"

"Exactly so." Carlos confirmed as he manipulated the projector to display a recording of a couple of firing tests. "As you can see here, we got the rifle to work after a bit of kludging. We rearranged some of its internal components to get it to work, but at we can get the weapon to work."

Ves nodded. "I'll be sure to study the modifications you've done to make it work. How did the big crystal fare?"

"The center crystal is a bust." His old friend bluntly stated. "Oh, don't misunderstand, we got some things to work, such as the ability to draw in energy. It's the discharge that's the issue."

"Lay it out on me, Carlos. I can take it."

"There are three major problems with the big crystal. First, it's output isn't steady. Sometimes it released a trickle, other times it dumps its entire capacity at once."

"So the control module I've attached to the crystal doesn't work?"

"It might as well be a piece of scrap! It's existence doesn't make any difference!"

"Noted. What else is wrong?"

"Well, our next problem with the chest crystal is we can't aim the light beam at all. The firing angle changes with each discharge. Sometimes, the beam goes high. Sometimes, it goes sideways. Other times, it goes low. Only rarely does the beam go straight and parallel to the ground."

Ves began to frown. "This is something else that the control module is supposed to take care of. Have you checked whether it worked at all?"

"We inspected it more than twenty times! All of the hardware works! It's just that the crystal outright ignores its signals for some reason."

"Okay. The third problem then. What else is there?"

"Well, the final issue is a fundamental design flaw more than a mechanical problem. You see, if the crystal released the beam at a straight angle, the hunch of the frame makes it difficult to aim it forward or upwards. The mech has to bend its upper body backwards in order to discharge the beam anywhere else but the ground. The test pilot told us that it's a huge tell that largely defeats the purpose of having a center crystal."

Ves already understood that point when he made those design choices. Even though his vision for his mech had changed to imitate the posture of the crystal builders, he didn't regret the choice.

"This also ties in with the control module. If it worked as it's supposed to, it allows the mech to fire a beam from the chest at the right angle. While that doesn't help too much if the mech pilot wants to shoot at something in the air, it should be fine on level terrain."

All of these major problems came down to the control module. For some reason, it didn't work the way it was supposed to. Ves scratched his head and tried to figure out why. It wasn't anything complex and Ves triple-checked each part that made up the control module, so he hadn't screwed it up.

There was something more fundamental in play. Ves found it strange that the control module worked perfectly in the simulations, but did nothing when he reproduced a physical copy."

Carlos continued to fill in Ves of all the pertinent information. Besides the malfunctioning gimmicks, the rest of the mech moved fast and smooth. According to the test pilot, it was the most comfortable rifleman mech he had ever piloted in his career.

"I don't get it." He said. "Your rifleman mech is mechanically sound and strong on its own if you leave out the gimmicks. That modified laser rifle of yours isn't really necessary either. Sure, it cuts down on total weight, but it's much easier to grab a readily available laser rifle than to supply a custom-built one for this model. Why bother with these crystals at all?"

That was a difficult question, especially in light of all the difficulties Ves faced in trying to get it to work.

Ves knocked his fist against the table. "No matter how troublesome it can be to integrate the gimmicks in my mech, the end product should be worth it. Mech design isn't all about the basics. The market expects more from us. Sure, I can publish a rifleman mech design without any bells and whistles right now if I wanted to, but what will that get me? Nothing!"

"The performance of your mech isn't that bad!"

"It's not good enough! Not if we compare it to the best on the market! That gimmick that you find so troublesome is our secret weapon and our only hopes of obtaining a share of the market."

Carlos sighed and crossed his arms. "You're too emotionally committed to this idea of including this toy into your mech. I know what's going on. You stumbled upon some fancy alien technology one day, and the first thing you do is try to find a way to add it to your next design. That's fine if you can get it to work, but who can tell if you are wasting countless of hours on a feature that will never meet our expectations?"

He laid out a very important question. In his eyes, Ves fell into the sunk cost fallacy. He was like a gambler who lost an early bet, but kept making bad bets one after another in order to recoup his earlier losses.

Chapter 400 Pairing

Unforeseen problems always popped up during a design process. Ves previously did his best to minimize inexplicable conundrums by never working with technology beyond his means.

For his first original design, he deliberately chose to start with a knight mech because it was one of the most mechanically simple type of mechs available. Stepping up to a rifleman mech which featured a lot more systems interacting with each other meant that the chances of something going wrong went up.

"I'm not going to draw back because of a single setback." Ves responded to Carlos. "Sure, I can make do without the gimmicks and publish the as is with a couple of touch-ups. But what does that say about me and my approach to designing mechs?"

"That you're safe?"

"Safe is boring! Safe doesn't drive any sales! The strongest maxim in the mech industry is that it's better to publish a mech with flaws but is extremely good at some aspect than to publish an all-round mech with nothing that stands out!"

"This is different than that, Ves! You're not talking about a flaw that can be worked around, but an outright failure of a core feature! What are you going to do with a crystal that's a dud?"

Ves faced a lot of pressure to discard the gimmick, but he believed it would be a mistake to do so. It was better not to publish his design at all than to leave it out. The crystal formed a core part of its identity since Ves initially set out his vision for his design.

Certainly, the huge amount of time he spent on incorporating this feature also played a factor. He spent so much time on it already that it would be an awful shame to discard his previous work.

Just like gamblers who threw away good money after bad, Ves maintained his confidence that he could overcome this setback in time. He was honest enough to know that he might be digging a deeper hole for himself, but he just couldn't stop at this point.

Ves waited for the prototype to return to be shipped to the private workshop, upon which he scoured its entire frame. Almost every part held in place and performed within expectations. Even the control module appeared to be in working order.

It just didn't work.

"Why not?" Ves scratched his head while furrowing his brows.

In order to test out his suspicions, he removed the control module from the prototype and began to connect it to some of the smaller crystals he hosted in his labs. After adjusting some of the settings in the control module, the

connected crystal responded perfectly according to the commands that Ves sent out.

"That's strange."

The control module worked with smaller crystals but not the bigger one. From what he determined so far, the problem didn't lie in the control module, but instead the bigger crystal.

"Maybe it's defective as well?"

Ves brought in the second large crystal that his homebrew synthesizer produced without flaws and tested out the same connection.

Again, it didn't work.

"Both of these crystals are flawless. They shouldn't differ from the crystals in the simulations at all?"

So what went wrong with these crystals? He started to perform numerous tests, and found a clue when he observed what happened to the signal being sent out by the control module. The signal seemed to disappear into nowhere once it entered the big crystals.

"I see what's going on."

These alien crystals reacted strangely to certain input, and it must have treated the incoming signal as an energy source. The crystal subsequently absorbed the signal, preventing it from issuing commands.

"Still, how can I solve this problem?"

Ves didn't understand why the smaller crystals properly recognized the signal while the bigger ones treated it as an energy source. He must have overlooked something very substantial when he initially scaled up the crystals through extrapolation.

"Maybe I need to scale up the properties of the signal as well."

He proceeded to tinker with the control module and set it to send out a variety of different signals. He increased and decreased its frequency, amplitude, duration and etcetera, only to come up with the same fruitless result.

"There's something about this supersized crystal that turns it into something completely different than its smaller varieties."

Experimenting with signals hadn't brought him any closer to a solution, so Ves took a step back and tried to approach the problem from a different angle. Right now, a major discrepancy existed between simulation and reality.

A mathematical model that tried to approach reality could never imitate all of its facets. Ves knew that. He suspected that some obscure effect not baked in the models played a key role in the inability for the crystal to process the signals.

Ves proceeded to compare the data from reality and simulation and tried to spot all of the differences.

"There's too many differences."

The datasets differed too drastically for him to make any sense where the problem lied. Ves had to manually comb through each discrepancy. It was like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

The work bored him a lot, and Ves hadn't been able to pin down the reasons why these differences appeared. He knew too little about how reality worked. Not even a Master Mech Designer dared to claim something similar.

"This might not be the right approach."

Maybe he should turn to help. There wasn't anything preventing him from calling someone knowledgeable to help him out of this fix. Ves considered sending a message to Master Olson or Horatio, her assistant.

"What will that do for their impression of me if I walk up to them like a child who lost his toy?"

Ves felt very reluctant to call for help for something he should be capable of solving on his own. To do otherwise was to admit that he had overreached.

He turned to the crystal golem whose spirit lingered in his mind. The crystal golem largely stayed quiet these last few days.

"Can you help me out? What does your understanding of crystals tell you?"

The crystal golem responded lethargically, as if it didn't have much of a clue either. However, it did take the initiative to send out an impression of a crystal cube to Ves.

"The crystal cube?" Ves remembered that the crystal golem had taken over his body and used its control over it to synthesize a strange crystal cube. He couldn't figure out its purpose, so he put it in the vault. "What is that cube supposed to do?"

The crystal golem released the mental equivalent of a shrug. Its spotty memory didn't cover that area. All the spirit knew was that the crystal cube was a very important device to the crystal builders.

Curious, Ves decided to retrieve the strange object. He left the labs and entered a highly secure elevator that brought him down to the vault floor. After going through an extensive round of checks, he entered the vault and opened up the safe that held the cube.

As he pulled it out, he stared at its transparent shape under the light. "Is this a weapon? A processor? Or something else?"

The crystal golem built it for a reason, and Ves believed that it played a very important role somehow. He spent the next couple of hours trying to get it to

reveal its secrets. He connected it to all kinds of devices and sent all kinds of signals at it, only to come up with nothing.

Even knocking at it with physical force failed to elicit a response. The cube behaved similar to the bigger crystal but it proved to be even more inscrutable.

After trying every trick in the book, Ves placed the cube against the surface of the big crystal on a whim.

Things suddenly started happening. Both crystals started lightning up from the inside. Ves almost dropped the cube, but he kept his hold on it as it interacted with the other crystal. From the sensor readouts, Ves quickly figured out that the circuits embedded into the structure of the crystals had become active for some reason.

The entire process took about three minutes to fizzle out. Both crystals turned inert and nothing Ves tried out could replicate the process.

"Maybe it works with other crystals as well?"

When Ves pressed the cube against the other big crystal, the pair started lightning up as well. They remained active for the exact amount of time before turning back to an inert state.

"Curious."

Ves proceeded to push the crystal cube against the smaller crystals as well. This caused the pair to light up, but for a much briefer amount of time. When Ves plotted the data, the formula was relatively straight forward. The larger the volume, the more time the process dragged on.

"This is all very interesting, but what has happened?"

He noticed an immediate difference when he resumed his basic tests. The big crystal no longer ate up incoming signals, but began to process them properly.

Its internal circuits appeared to be following different instructions this time that made them compatible to this control method.

More than that, many other parameters improved as well, though not more than ten percent in any single area. This held true for each crystal no matter the size.

By now, Ves slowly understood the purpose of the crystal cube, if only one of them. "This is a key. It's a catalysts that unlocks the true potential of the crystals.

It had to do with the circuits embedded in the structure. From the scans he made, Ves noticed that the crystals hadn't changed, but the energy running through the circuits followed different paths.

In truth, there was much about the circuits that Ves did not understand. Even now, only a fraction of the total circuits ever did anything.

"I think I solved my problem now."

Ves set out to resolve the problem with the chest crystals and succeeded in coming up with a solution. While Ves did not prefer to become dependent on a single object, he had no other alternatives for the time being.

The crystal cube was unique and formed the key in getting the most important gimmick to work. From another perspective, its uniqueness was a good thing. It meant that others wouldn't be able to replicate his gimmicks without creating something similar to the unique cube.

Good luck with that.

The advantages became more clear to Ves, and he grinned when he realized he possessed a monopoly on something. "Only my gold label rifleman mechs will enjoy these extravagantly-sized crystals. Every other variant will have to make do without this capability."

The bronze and silver label versions would only hold crystals only half as large or smaller. Ves hadn't determined the threshold where the control module's signals ceased to work on a crystal.

With a clear direction in front of him, Ves wrapped up his experiments and embedded the big crystal back in its socket on the chest of the prototype. He also took aside the laser rifle and partially disassembled it in order to activate it with the crystal cube as well.

After that, he spent a couple of days making minor adjustments to the rest of the frame. Ves hadn't let the problems with the gimmicks distract him from the other shortcomings.

In order to save some time, Ves decided not to fabricate a second prototype, but make his modifications on the design on the spot. While it was a bit more troublesome to change the shape and configuration of an existing mech, he still managed to accomplish most of what he wanted to do.

As for the rest, Ves went back to the Dortmund production line to fabricate the remaining replacement parts. After a brief assembly, the minutely-improved prototype was ready to be sent to the testing grounds again.

Chief Cyril and Carlos looked perplexed when Ves informed them that he solved the problem with the chest crystal.

"You still don't understand anything about these crystals. Is it really safe to go through with using them?" Carlos asked.

"I think the risks are manageable." Ves confidently replied. "I've tried almost everything to get those inactive circuits to work, but nothing happened. While there's a risk they'll activate in the middle of a battle and do something strange, I don't think it will happen very often."

Although it sounded as if he was content to include a ticking time bomb in his design, Ves believed it would take an extraordinary impulse to elicit a strange

reaction. In those conditions, the rest of the mech might already be trashed before the crystal could do something strange.

"Let's get through the tests as fast as possible so I can make my final tweaks on my design!"