

### Chapter 431 Collaborate

"As you may have heard, the 3rd Imodris Legion inflicted substantial damage to the Bright Republic's morale. Although the Republic can cope with the material damage of their raids, it is much harder to restore the hearts of our citizens. The Mech Corps therefore expects the Flagrant Vandals to pay back the Vesians in kind. Colonel Lowenfield has therefore decided to pay back the 3rd Imodris Legion in kind by striking at their dukedom."

This alarmed Ves and some of the others because Imodris was a prosperous dukedom situated in the interior of the Vesia Kingdom. The Vandals would not only have to cross the border, they also needed to hop from star system to star system without revealing their presence inside Vesian space.

That was almost impossible to accomplish.

The moment the Vesians detected their presence within the border, they would surely dispatch a hunting party to the Vandals. Owing to their territorial advantage, the Vesians have an easier time to surround the Vandals than the latter slipping the noose and returning to Republic space.

"In the short but illustrious history of the Flagrant Vandals, our regiment has deployed to Imodris several times. Each time the alert garrisons of Imodris detected us quickly, sparking harrowing fights where we broke through the blockades at heavy costs. While the colonel does not intend to flinch from Imodris, neither can we afford to make the same bull-headed approach."

Therefore, the Vandals cultivated some relations among the rebels.

"With the help of the so-called Vesian Revolutionary Front, Colonel Lowenfield is confident we can circumvent the strict Vesian monitoring in their desolate star systems and approach a highly industrialized planet without any forewarning."

In other words, it was like breaking into a heavily defended mansion by bribing the butler into letting them in. The risks and perils of such a move could be imagined.

Perhaps the ultimate plan was a little more elaborate, but from what Ves heard so far, many things could go wrong.

The first and most important they should ask was whether they could trust the rebels to keep their word.

Professor Velten didn't reveal too much about this. "The colonel is handling it. We have collaborated with this group of revolutionaries before, and they have been proven to be reliable as long as they are handsomely paid. Admittedly, this raiding expedition can't compare to the minor border incursions we collaborated on before."

From Professor Velten's description, the VRF didn't sound like much.

As a monarchy in a time where humans advanced to a point where they settled half the galaxy, their existence was very controversial.

Those who grew up in the kingdoms and empires usually took their existence for granted, but those who grew up in Republics and other forms of non-hereditary governments thought of monarchies as backwards.

This last point was a generalisation, not an absolute. This meant that not every Vesian believed in letting a bunch of spoiled and entitled nobles and royals dictate every facet of their lives.

A governance system where a small number won big would always present a lot of losers. Those who suffered directly from the injustices within the kingdom eventually formed several resistance groups.

True to their chaotic nature and their rejection of strong authority, they couldn't manage to form a united front. The VRF was one of the only rebel groups that

still worked to unite the different resistance movements together. They achieved limited success in this area as many groups only paid lip service to this ideal.

Nevertheless, it could not be denied that the VRF was well-connected. However, this also increased the risk of cooperating with them. The Vandals not only needed to trust the VRF, they also had to put faith in their ability to persuade the local rebel movements into facilitating this risky operation.

"As of now, the Wolf Mother will enter into an elevated state of readiness. Contact with the outside galaxy will be even more restricted than before, so our database will no longer receive any updates from the central database maintained by Mech Corps. Keep this in mind when you work on the designs. You will not be able to rely on recent innovations to solve your problems."

Half of the mech designers in the room groaned. Quite a few of them managed to solve long-standing problems by applying something that wasn't possible before. Cutting off the updates to the database forced them to revisit old methods and try to get them to work. This was extremely slow and frustrating work.

"Professor?" Someone asked. "What kind of tweaks do we have to make to ready our mechs for the coming battle?"

"Good question. While I am unable to inform you of our target, I am still allowed to relay some conditions. First, the star system is heavily defended from space, but the Vesians pulled half of the defending mechs to reinforce the frontlines. What remains of its garrisons consist of reserves, much of them recruited from the local population."

This was an important detail.

"The planet in question isn't being run very well. The nobles in charge are decadent and the planet has been running a deficit for years. The planetary

administration is forced to skimp on their services, which has made much of the underclass very mad. It's a breeding ground for rebels, and the VRF thinks they can convince the local rebels into disabling some of the local defenses in orbit and letting us in."

This time, Ves raised his hand and asked a question. "Ma'am, why would the local rebels agree to let their home planet suffer? Won't we be making things worse for them by raining down death and destruction?"

"That is a valid point to make." The professor nodded, yet waved her hand dismissively. "We have made the appropriate precautions. We are more than aware of the risks and we know more about the Vesia Kingdom than most of their citizens. Almost everyone in this state has a bone to pick with someone else. This is nothing new for us."

The Flagrant Vandals hadn't run amuck in enemy space without learning a thing or two about their enemy. Although most of the time they operated alone, sometimes they cooperated with the local factions if they needed access to a sensitive area.

Although Professor Velten didn't intimate anything of the sort, Ves read more from her answer and the way she chose to answer it than she wanted to reveal.

If Ves wasn't wrong, one of the major reasons the Vandals stayed afloat up until now was because it also collaborated with the noble factions!

Though Ves kept his expressions neutral, inwardly he felt shocked at the audacity of it all. He would bet that no one in high command even knew about this! What would the Mech Corps think if one of their mech regiments collaborated directly with a faction of the Kingdom?

The news alone would shock the entire Republic!

Professor Velten couldn't blame his level of observation. Ves heard many stories about some of the murkier deeds of the Mech Corps from his father and the other Larkinsons. Even then, none of those tales matched the brazenness in which the Vandals shook hands with the Vesians.

Ves guessed that the Vandals only cooperated in an opportunistic fashion. The rivalry among the Vesian nobles was legendary, and the Vandals probably presented themselves to discontented nobles as a convenient way to ruin their rivals.

As the meeting wrapped up, Professor Velten called up the Journeymen to hold a more private discussion while letting the Apprentices enjoy a rare break.

Ves, Laida and Pierce gathered around in a corner turned into a makeshift lounge area. A couple of comfortable chairs and sofas provided an oasis of calm during the most frustrating moments of work.

Pierce looked at Ves and Laida with a questioning pair of eyes. "Have you two been getting overwhelmed by the work they pile up on your desk?"

Laida nodded. "The Inheritor design is frustrating. Nevermind that it's a spaceborn mech and that I only specialize in aerial mechs, but the Inheritor is showing its age. There is hardly anything we can improve without drastically overhauling its design."

"So it's a legacy design?"

"It's not old to the point to be called a legacy, but it's design originated from the first half of this current mech generation. We are now late in the cycle and there are several major advancements in currentgen technology that we are missing out on for the Inheritor because the effort required to transform every Inheritor mech in existence is too much."

The Inheritor mechs serve as the workhorse of the Vandals. It was one of their most common mechs, and highlighted their preference for close-ranged combat against other mechs.

"Ves, what do you think about the Inheritor?" Laida asked him in a way that made it hard for him to withhold his answer.

"I don't know. I've never seen the Flagrant Vandals in action besides some incidental battle footage. To me, the Vandals are living at the edge of the moment. It's true that fielding lots of light mechs is cheap and easy, but that lack of weight will cost them dearly if they are ever forced into a position to fight against a proper Vesian mech regiment. For example, any of the 3rd Imodris Legion's regiments can smash them into pieces."

"That's counterbalanced by the fact that they are easier to pilot and excellent in overtaking supply convoys."

This was why the Vandals regarded the Inheritor so highly. The Vandals faced a lot of difficulties in recruiting capable mech pilots. Any recruit with promise would be snapped up by the more desirable regiments. The Vandals mostly received the dregs the service. They couldn't do much against mech pilots with attitude problems, but those with lack of talent in piloting could still be brought up as cannon fodder inside an Inheritor mech.

Compared to Laida, Pierce faced a very different problem with the Akkara.

"Heavy mechs are different from light mechs. There's much more leeway in their design. Even though it's rather old as well, its internal architecture changed so much over the years that I can hardly call it outdated. My team has done well in updating it to the latest standard. The only problem is that our implementations fall short."

"Because there are too many systems inside a heavy mech, am I right?"

"That's right. My father once taught me that it is a heavy commitment if you wish to embark on designing a heavy mech. The Akkara design is a basket case of incompatibilities. There is hardly any optimisation done because the Wolf Mother's processors would crash if we threw too many things at it. Heavy mechs should be designed in proper research bases, not aboard a factory ship."

Lack of manpower and computing power slowed down the development of the Akkara design. It was a very unsubtle mech and required brute force to solve many of its problem.

"Is your design team biting off more than they can chew?"

"That's an understatement!" Pierce huffed. "In my eyes, while the Akkara design fills an important gap in the lineup of the Vandals, we can't keep up with the complexities of this parade horse."

Ves could have said the same. Though the problems with the Hellcat didn't sound so extreme as the Akkara, a hybrid knight came with its own bag of issues.

"All three designs developed internally by the Vandals have one thing in common." Ves remarked as he put his mind on them. "They're products of pride."

"Pride?"

Ves shrugged a bit. "Maybe you can call it stubbornness. If the Flagrant Vandals wanted to, they could have borrowed a ready-made design from the central database. I'm sure the Mech Corps developed a raft of highly-optimised designs of a light skirmisher, a medium hybrid knight and a heavy cannoneer."

"Why stick to the current designs then?"

"Because every mech regiment prides their own identity. Only rarely will a mech regiment borrow a design cooked up by other design teams within the Mech Corps because that would be admitting that they can't wipe their own butts."

"That's crazy." Laida murmured as she shook her head. "We're not like any other mech regiment. Our design team is less than a fifth the size of any other team. We can only cope with developing one design at most."

No matter how much they think the current policy was stupid, none of it could be changed. Ves sighed and sank down into his seat. "This isn't the only area where the Vandals are sticking to their guns. These guys have taken self-sufficiency to an unprecedented height for a mech regiment of the Mech Corps. It's baked into their DNA."

That has served the Vandals well so far, but how long could they go on in the same manner? Eventually, they would hit a wall.

#### **Chapter 432 Conflicting Directions**

Ever since Ves embarked on the path to become a mech designer, he progressed at a rapid pace. He liked to think he learned to see things others didn't. Though his place among the Vandals only allowed him to observe a tiny part of their functioning, what he derived from it worried him a lot.

Ves placed his hand against the surface of the bulkhead and felt its cold metallic touch. The Wolf Mother traveled through a succession of star systems. Each time the ship exited FTL, the entire ship underwent a minor upheaval. It spoke much about the haphazard way the Wolf Mother grew to her current form.

Yet despite this side effect, nothing suffered any ill effects. The resourceful crew of the Wolf Mother timed their most critical operations around the schedule of transitions. They made sure that the production lines didn't work on something delicate whenever the ship entered or dropped out of FTL.

"You're tougher than you look like."

Much of what made the Vandals survive up to now came down to their ingenuity. They scraped by with a fraction of the resources that a proper mech regiment enjoyed. Though he found their design development plans to be perplexing and the legality of some of their actions a little iffy, he had to admit that the Vandals was the top regiment in the Republic in terms of resourcefulness alone.

Having lived among them and observed them up close made Ves a little sympathetic to their cause. Despite their outward displays of cynicism, they still retained a core of discipline and duty.

With regards to his work, his routine remained the same, though Alloc finally started to notice that Ves finished his work faster than others. Now that he ceased to be preoccupied with tinkering with the software of the Hellcat, Alloc finally spent more time watching over the mech designers working under him. Compared to the other Apprentices, Ves stood out in how relaxed he approached his assignments.

At some time, Alloc pulled Ves aside into a private office.

The Journeyman Mech Designer stared at the younger man with a penetrating stare. "Ves, according to the logs in your terminal, the speed at which you are nailing down the right numbers is a little frightening. It's so out of bounds that I've been testing you with a number of different problems. The way you work with math and physics is frankly frightening for a mech designer of your age. Who are you?"

"I'm Ves Larkinson, no one else. As for how I got to be so good, didn't you read my record?"

"I've seen nominal disciples to Masters in action before. None of them have rocketed upwards as fast as you." Alloc frowned as he tried to crack the secret

behind Ves' ascent. "Though I don't specialize in Physics, the ease at which you solve complex issues related to this field surpasses what I'm capable of. Are you an alien or something?"

Ves laughed a little. "Sir, though my genes are kind of mixed up right now, I'm still a human in heart and blood. My life experiences are a little different from others."

One thing that Ves was most afraid of was eliciting Alloc's jealousy. It would be extremely depressing if his direct superior wanted to squash Ves down due to being unable to tolerate someone younger being better than an actual Journeyman.

It appeared that Ves did not have to worry about that account. As much as Alloc enjoyed his own status, the dire state of the 6th Flagrant Vandals and the Hellcat design team had left Alloc in a state where extra talent and manpower should be cherished.

"You're an anomaly, Ves." Alloc concluded with utmost seriousness. "I can't quite put my thumb on you. Nothing in your record makes sense. The only way to explain it is if some unknown influence is cultivating you."

Ves could say nothing against that. He couldn't mention anything about the Mech Designer System and how it had been a massive aid to his mech design career. He would rather let Alloc make his own conclusions.

After some time, Alloc nodded and smacked his fist against his palm. "I understand why the Mech Corps sent someone as promising as you to the Vandals. Unlike headquarters, we don't care about your allegiances at all. You're aboard the Wolf Mother just like the rest, so I hardly believe you would do anything that would go against our interests. We are literally on the same boat in that regard."

Though Ves felt a little pissed that Alloc casually questioned his loyalties like that, he was smart enough not to make a fuss about it. This was a critical moment for him. Opening his mouth would just ruin his chances.

"I've decided now. Since we're so short-handed, I'll let you pick your own assignments. I'll increase your privileges so that you can access the planning and the list of issues for the Hellcat design. I don't have the authority to unlock the entire design schematics to you, but you should have plenty to do with the access you already have."

"Thank you, sir! You won't regret your decision!"

"You better not slack off, Ves. The Flagrant Vandals has already joined the main fleet, and we have already crossed the borders. While I can't predict how much time it takes to reach the Imodris Duchy, try to present some solid results within a month. Any longer and we won't have the time to implement any improvements you've made to our existing Hellcats."

Ves promised to respect the confidentiality of the information made available to him. Satisfied, Alloc delivered on his promise and raised the amount of files Ves could access.

Among the miscellaneous documents that Alloc unlocked for Ves, the most important piece of information was the succinct list of issues and problems facing the Hellcat.

They consisted of observations made by the mech pilots that handled the Hellcats and the problems foreseen by the mech designers themselves. All of the problems amounted to a very long list, though most seemed rather trivial.

Still, for a perfectionist like Ves, he became dismayed when he finally realized the extent of the imperfections.

"This is only the tip of the iceberg."

Many more problems wracked the Hellcat design. They just hadn't been observed yet.

"Let's forget about the problems out of sight. The visible ones alone are more than enough to keep me busy for years."

Alloc took a chance in increasing the privileges enjoyed by Ves, but unspoken in that move was that his superior expected more things. Ves needed to prove his chops and repay Alloc's trust.

Not everyone responded well to his increase in responsibilities. Something like this couldn't be hidden from the other Apprentices.

"Sir! I protest! Mr. Larkinson is just a temp! He's the last person among us who should be handling all of that sensitive information!"

Alloc happened to have a very effective response to that argument. "Tell that to me once you can outsmart Mr. Larkinson."

No one dared to make that claim. In the previous weeks, Ves painstakingly demonstrated his competence, which much have surely damaged their confidence. Though he was an outsider who only joined the Hellcat design team due to the war, his presence had already improved their efficiency.

Though the Apprentices didn't look resigned, they could only keep their opinions to themselves. They stared enviously as Ves browsed the expanded database in a leisurely manner.

"What shall I tackle?"

Ves had no time to pay attention to everyone else's stares. Alloc expected great results from him, so Ves needed to pick something impactful that fell within his capabilities to solve. Not a lot of problems met this criteria.

He flicked through each and every problem on the list. Even if he rejected most of them, it was still valuable for him to read this list. "Hmmm... software

again, not my cup of tea. Increasing the actuation speed of the legs, sounds more interesting, but that's hardly consequential for a spaceborn mech.

"Enhancing the power of the wrist-mounted nail drivers... that sounds interesting."

The nail drivers served a small purpose to the Hellcat design, perhaps too small. Due to weight and space constraints, the nail driver only accommodated four nails in total. This was highly limiting and only really gave the Hellcat an extra lifeline in certain situations.

"Can I increase the power of the nail driver or overhaul its internal mechanisms?"

He already thought of a couple of tweaks, but a bigger solution remained elusive. Professor Velten must have gone over this problem plenty of times and this time was no different. The nail drivers enjoyed her personal attention for a time and she optimized the nail drivers to the point where she couldn't come up with more gains.

As Ves studied the schematics of the nail driver and some other components, he also perceived the flavor of Professor Velten's design philosophy.

It felt a bit strange.

Since the Hellcat was a collaborative project, the purity of its design was rather muddled. Still, Professor Velten's imprint stood head and shoulders above everyone else's, including the minor work that Ves imparted on the design up to now.

"Ves found it difficult to describe Professor Velten's design philosophy.

"Perpetuance? No. "timelessness, enduring, fading."

One of the hidden dangers in the Hellcat design was that Ves faintly sensed some weaknesses seeping into the heart of its design. For some reason, Professor Velten started to lose her love for the design.

Ves couldn't blame her. The Hellcat's numerous demands tore it apart. It needed to fly, use up three weapon systems at once and it needed to be well-protected as well. It was enough to hear his heart out!

Though he didn't think well of the Hellcat, the way the Vandals made the most out of the design made Ves realize that not all mechs had to be technical masterpieces.

"A good mech isn't necessarily the one with the best specs or the strongest X-Factor. The best mech is the machine that gets the job done.

In this regard, the Hellcat made a definite impression on the enemy. Therefore, Ves found it regretful that Professor Velten started to slide.

"I can't let this downward trend go on. Whatever is going on with Professor Velten, she can't leave her own work in the dust like this. It deserves more."

In choosing where to start first, Ves no longer relied on the data included in the reports. Instead, he closed his eyes and started to commune with the design on a spiritual level.

It was hard, incredibly hard. In order to understand the nucleus of this mech, Ves needed to cut through all of the interference. Too many people used to work on this design. Their mixed sentiments polluted the design and made it harder for Ves to get a read on the design.

Ves continually refined his methods, but they only amounted to a limited amount of improvement.

What Ves got out of the Hellcat design was decidedly mixed. He perceived conflicting emotions from two unknown designers that nonetheless left a huge mark on the design.

"Seems like Professor Velten hadn't designed this mech after all. She inherited from other Seniors."

The imprints of those two echoes were so strong and distinct that they couldn't be anything else but Senior Mech Designers. Though Ves couldn't get a solid read on the design itself, Ves figured he could infer some of its core traits by interpreting the imprints from the Seniors.

This was a very fascinating experience, and despite appearing like a lazy idiot in the presence of the other mech designers, Ves cheerfully plunged into the depths of the two distinct flavors.

"Interesting!"

Much of the issues surrounding the Hellcat design could be traced back to its original designers. They possessed very distinct outlooks and wanted to pull the Hellcat into two separate directions.

One designer favored defense, and possessed a lot of experience in designing knights. The other designer emphasized versatility, and must have possessed a substantial amount of experience in designing hybrid and multipurpose mechs.

Both of them somehow ended up working on the same project, and from the looks of it, neither of them possessed authority over the other. They had been forced to cooperate on equal terms.

"What a tragedy."

Whoever ordered them to do so didn't know anything about mech design. With no obvious lead designer in charge of the project, the Hellcat grew in

scope and its featured ballooned to its present bloated state. Though they did a remarkable job in slimming down its internals, the interconnectedness of it all hadn't aged the Hellcat very well.

"It's a design that's difficult to update."

#### **Chapter 433 Rotten Core**

As a spaceborn hybrid mech design, the Hellcat had been stretched into two opposite directions right at the onset of its conception. In the eyes of someone like Ves, he would argue that the Hellcat lacked a unifying vision that could have guided the design to better straits.

"It's as if two stubborn kids wanted to play with the same doll and stretched it out between them as they tried to claim sole ownership over the toy."

The consequences to this could be imagined. The Hellcat, with its incongruous tiger head and substantially armored build looked like a cross between two very different mechs. The addition of the nail drivers and the missile launchers seemed more like gimmicks tacked on as an afterthought rather than a mainstay that the mech could rely on to save the day.

"At least the Caesar Augustus can rely on its miniature laser cannons to take out targets just out of range of its sword."

The Caesar Augustus was a much more inferior mech in terms of specs and scope, but the mere fact that it had been designed by a single mech designer who knew what he wanted made it a more coherent design.

Compared to the first work of an Apprentice Mech Designer, the Hellcat incorporated many advanced techniques and applications. Even after studying the additional documents made available to him, Ves hardly understood how the original designers managed to stuff so much capabilities in so little space.

Nevertheless, the current foibles with the Hellcat design underscored that technical prowess couldn't compensate for a lack of vision.

"It's not that it can't be done, but this is just a case where the original designers didn't leave any leeway for the future."

Ves found it sad that such a promising design had been born with what effectively amounted to a deformity. It didn't become very evident at birth, but as it grew older, the design started to crack and show its weaknesses.

Therefore, the responsibilities piled up on the shoulders of the Hellcat design team was too much for them to cope. Even Ves couldn't steer away a ship that was determined to travel right into a sun.

Sadly, even if Alloc and Professor Velten were aware of this critical fault, they couldn't convince the Vandals to replace their prestige mechs with a different design. Organizational inertia meant that the design team needed to stick with this creaking product no matter how much it fell apart.

"How depressing."

This important realization put his role into perspective. He shouldn't attempt to do anything too ambitious. With his current level of skill, he had no chance in revamping the design to a healthy state.

The best he could describe its situation was that the longevity of the design was running out. Rather than extending its useful lifetime, Ves could only improve some minor performance parameters in order to let the Hellcat make the most out of its final years of active use.

Ves had no doubt that the Vandals would eventually be forced to drop the Hellcat design during this war. The Vesian mech designers faced a lot of pressure in improving their own designs, and if the Hellcat failed to keep up, its end would come sooner or later.

"That's something that will happen at least a year from now on. For now, the Hellcat is still a viable mech."

He returned to the list of problems and decided to tackle an issue that was challenging but one he could also complete within a month. It concerned a very persistent problem regarding the energy efficiency of the mech.

The Hellcat's high performance metrics and ability to make an immediate impact on the battlefield came at a cost. The power draw was enormous and the heat that it built up was very problematic for a mech in space.

When the design originally came into being, the original designers already mitigated these issues. However, as the years passed and the design kept being tweaked to keep up with the current times, the old optimisations in terms of power draw and heat dispersal ceased to work as effectively. The design had strayed too much from its old lines, and the introduction of new components complicated the internal architecture in ways that made it much less efficient.

It all sounded boring to a bystander, but the veteran mech pilots that have piloted the Hellcat for years became increasingly frustrated at this downward trend.

The report on the problem came with a quote from a very pissed off mech pilot.

"Why is it that the Hellcat keeps getting worse? I don't care about faster flight systems and more lethal nail drivers! I just want a mech that can last an entire fight! Hell, it won't even last a short skirmish sometimes. Fix this issue immediately or roll back the design to an older version!"

The problem had obviously brewed for an extended period of time. The Hellcat design team should have been more responsive on this issue, but for some reason they kept on holding to the same course.

In all honesty, solving this issue required a multi-disciplinary approach. Ves wasn't sure if he possessed the right breadth and depth of skills to be able to

provide a solution to this problem. After all, neither Alloc nor Professor Velten had done anything about it, though that might be because they had bigger things in mind.

"In any case, this is a useful starting point to prove my worth. It's a very legitimate problem that needs solving anyhow."

Ves began to dive into his work by investigating the evolution of the design in recent years. He wanted to trace back the changes to specific changes in the design so he could come up with localized solutions.

All of this was boring and tedious, but Ves never lost his motivation. Several weeks went by in a fog as Ves single-mindedly focused on this sole issue alone. He made a substantial amount of progress, but the sheer amount of changes left him a little fatigued. It was too much work to establish the consequences of every single change to the design.

To be honest, he was being stymied by the sheer level of interconnectedness of the design. His inability to understand the Hellcat down to its roots also didn't help. There was a level of depth and complexity to each of its shapes.

Ves felt like he was toddler looking at a painting and ruining it by dabbling his fingers through paint and raking them across the canvas. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, his solutions only made things worse.

Still, at least he made some progress, however sluggish it turned out to be. Any progress was better than no progress at all, but it defied the high hopes he had started with. Ves grossly underestimated the actual challenge of reshaping an already completed design at the Senior level.

"My progress is too slow." Ves muttered as he furrowed his brows. Several weeks into his task, and he only completed a fourth of what he should have accomplished.

A lack of understanding lay at the heart of his inability to progress. He couldn't do much to advance his understanding of the higher-level concepts that made Journeyman and Senior Mech Designers unique. Short of breaking through himself, Ves would have to accept that his perspective would be limited for the time being.

He could still advance his understanding in a different direction, something which he already did quite well.

Therefore, one day, Ves put down his work and marched up to Alloc. "Sir?"

"What is it, Ves?"

"I'd like to request an opportunity to witness the Hellcat in action. I've spent a substantial amount of time with its design, but I still only have a vague idea of how this mech is supposed to perform in action."

Alloc frowned and turned away from his work. "A mech designer is supposed to be content with the design schematics alone. There shouldn't be any need to see a real Hellcat."

"Respectfully, that's not the way I work. The best I can describe it is that I design my mechs from feeling. Without a feel for a design, I can't work with it as well as I ought to. The Hellcat is at least ten times more complex than anything I've ever worked on before, so it is even more vital for me to get a handle on the mech action."

"I'm not inclined to grant your request. I'm under orders to keep temps like you in one place. It's going to take a lot of effort to convince Professor Velten to grant an exception for you."

Ves already expected something like this, so he provided an immediate response to that argument. Ves waved his hand, causing his comm to transfer his work up to now. "Look at what I've accomplished. This is only a fraction of what I am able to do."

Curious, Alloc turned to his terminal and studied some of the solutions that Ves came up with. They weren't anything groundbreaking, nor did they improve the performance of the Hellcat by a substantial amount.

Nevertheless, it was already impressive for an Apprentice Mech Designer to lessen the problem of excessive power draw by a fraction of a percentage point without negatively affecting anything else.

"Hm." The Journeyman quickly processed the solutions Ves came up with.

"These solutions don't seem half-bad. We'll need to perform a lot more simulations in order to verify their soundness, but you have made a substantial contribution to our design team."

Ves sensed a caveat there.

"This does not mean that I can allow you to run off to the mech pilots and pester them to show off their Hellcats to you. You have to realize that there is a time and place for things. We do not allow anyone to come into contact with a Vandal."

In the end, Ves did not receive approval and had to go back empty-handed. Why didn't Alloc grant his seemingly reasonable request?

One possible explanation stood out.

"There must be something going on that can't be leaked."

Ves thought back on what the recent announcements were about. The Colonel Lowenfield intended to sneak the 6th Flagrant Vandals all the way to the Imodris Duchy from the border.

This was a daunting task for any mech regiment that hailed from the Kingdom's mortal enemy. The only way the Vandals could get this far without detection was if they enlisted the help of the local rebels.

"Have the Vesian rebels already rendezvoused with the fleet?"

The idea was frightening, but sounded very real. Perhaps the Vesian Revolutionary Front hadn't come with a handful of emissaries, but brought a couple of carriers and mechs along for the ride as well.

This basically meant that a mech regiment of the Republic willingly joined hands with an element of the Vesia Kingdom!

It did not matter if the Vandals struck a deal with the rebels, the mere fact that they owed their allegiance to Vesia, if not for the Kingdom, was a huge affront if news ever leaked!

"Why would the Vesian rebels accompany the Vandals with their own war assets?"

It didn't make any sense. The 6th Flagrant Vandals might not be very impressive compared to the rest of the Mech Corps, but it was a proper mech regiment at its core.

Ves tried to wrack his brains but couldn't come up with any satisfactory explanation except for one.

"What if they lied to us?"

This was a very serious accusation to make, and a tenuous one as well since Ves based this conclusion off a series of very wild conjectures. Still, it reinforced his impression that something shady was going on with the Vandals right now. Perhaps their presumed mission of penetrating deep into Vesian space in order to raid their industrial planet wasn't so simple after all.

"All of this is wild talk without evidence."

Without confirmations, his ideas remained ideas. Although he had a very overactive imagination, sometimes the truth often turned out to be simpler than he suspected.

Still, Ves wasn't comfortable with staying put. If nothing else, he had a duty to follow the leads and see where he ended up. "There's too much at stake. I can't afford to be negligent."

#### Chapter 434 Higher Concepts

Ever since he started questioning the motives of the 6th Flagrant Vandals, Ves regarded his posting in a different light. The undercurrent of discontent and the general apathy towards the Mech Corps may not be confined to the lower ranks. What if the underlings merely reflected the honest attitudes of their superiors?

Sitting behind his terminal, Ves turned around his head and regarded Alloc and the Apprentices in a different light. Besides the temp sent from the Rittersberg region, the others all had a couple years of service under their belt.

Curiously, not many mech designers in the design department of the Vandals stuck around for more than half a decade or so. Alloc happened to be one of the few exceptions due to being mentored by Professor Velten. Everyone else seemed to have been sent to the Vandals as punishment or exile.

Could he talk to them about his concerns?

"No."

Ves did not kid himself that he could find a place aboard the Wolf Mother without any form of monitoring. Having left his personal comm with the Privacy Shield behind on Cloudy Curtain, he no longer possessed any means of blocking any electronic ears and eyes pointed in his direction.

"Besides, where do their loyalties lie?"

Not every mech designer entered the private sector and started a business to sell their own mechs. Some wanted an easier path in life, so they applied to established mech manufacturers or design studios to exercise their craft.

Naturally, only those with promise received the best job offerings where they could actually be involved in the design of a mech. Average mech designers stood no chance in obtaining an important position, and would always devolve in a glorified technicians.

In fact, a large number of chief technicians graduated with a degree in mech design, only to be relegated to a job in the mech stables or mech workshops.

The same pattern persisted in the military. The Mech Corps relied on many different mech designs, and they needed a huge number of mech designers to keep their mechs fresh and up to date.

Working in the Mech Corps formed a particularly attractive prospect to most mech designers. Their pay was bad, but the benefits were good and every mech designer assigned to a design team received varying levels of access to the central database, which not only contained lots of designs and exclusive technologies, but also contained a library of very valuable textbooks.

All of this made working for the Mech Corps a good starting point for any mech designer that lacked the confidence to dive into the cutthroat competitive private sector. Once they served for twenty years or more and retired from the service, they would be in a much better position to enter the market.

"Since the mech designers in the service value their time here so much, why don't I see any older ones?"

While the Apprentice Mech Designers aboard the Wolf Mother varied in age, they tended to be in their thirties or younger. What Ves really paid attention to was that none of them had been in the design department for long.

"Where are all the veteran designers?"

Had they been transferred out or cashiered, or did something else happen to them? Ves tried to approach the topic in an oblique manner when he conversed with some of the Apprentices during mealtime.

"Say, our teams are awfully short-handed." He said in a casual manner as he ate his soup next to a colleague. "Why aren't the higher ups increasing their effort at expanding our teams?"

The tired man munched on a meatpie for a bit before he answered. "No one wants to come and work for the Vandals. We're the refuse pit of the Vandals. You don't volunteer to work for us, you get sent here. And while the Mech Corps loves to dump all their problem cases in our laps, they'll be accused of committing war crimes if they did that to every mech designer they don't like."

They both chuckled a bit at that.

"It's not so bad here. Sure, the Vandals are a little shabbier than most, but we still have plenty of room in our three design teams. My question is why are we so chronically undermanned? This isn't a new phenomenon."

"I don't know what to say." The other mech designer shrugged, though he seemed a little more reticent this time. "There used to be some mech designers in our team that are senior to me. They served for a couple of years but their exhaustion continued to grow. They would have collapsed sooner or later."

"Did they?"

"Professor Velten approached them before they got to that point. The professor offered to transfer them to a new, exciting and secret design team far away from the Wolf Mother. I don't know all the details, but from what I've seen from the faces of the mech designers who accepted, they all looked ecstatic."

"Did every mech designer accept the transfer?"

"Yup. You'd be a fool not to. While I appreciate the chance to contribute to the Hellcat design, it will ruin you if you try to work with it for more than a handful of years. There's something very corrosive about this design that grates at your sanity. I don't know how to describe it. All I know is that I'm already feeling that my limit is within sight."

This sounded very strange to Ves. He put down his spoon and faced his colleague with open eyes. "Why is the Hellcat design so damaging?"

"I asked Alloc one day, and he said that the Hellcat is a design that incorporates transcendent concepts that only Journeyman Mech Designers and higher could handle. It's always said that Apprentices aren't mature in the field of mech design, and I guess this is one of the most important reasons why."

Ves believed this statement. It explained much of how the mech industry worked. He only heard an inkling about it during his studies, probably so that the professors could shield them from the truth, but it might indeed be the case that advanced designs possessed such an effect.

He even figured that it might be related to the intangible qualities of a mech, but that shouldn't be it. Ves did not perceive anything damaging during his own investigation of the Hellcat.

It was likely the other mech designer was right, and that it was a case of overstraining the mind when dealing with concepts beyond the means of understanding. There were plenty of secrets hidden in plain sight, and Ves might eventually go crazy as well if he dove too deep in the design nuances of the Hellcat.

After Ves finished his dinner, he left on his own accord. For the next several days, he broached the same topic to a couple of other mech designers. Ves

wasn't close with any of them so didn't receive any good answers, but he figured that they believed that nothing sinister was at play.

The key takeaway from his questioning was that the story he heard possessed an element of truth. Mech designers indeed needed to get away from a design that was slowly driving them insane.

What Ves wanted to know was where they went. As far as Ves was aware of, the 6th Flagrant Vandals did not maintain a separate group of mech designers. So where did those people work? Was it another mech regiment, or something shadier?

Ves ended up with more questions than answers, but he did not believe he achieved a fruitless result. While he couldn't follow up on his detail, he believed that it might be very important down the line.

"That still begs the question that I haven't been able to answer."

He came no closer to finding out what the Vandals planned to do. This frustrated him to no end, which slowed him down when he was on duty. He wasn't in the mood to improve the power efficiency of the Hellcat when all he could think about was whether the Vandals committed treason.

There was a difference between breaking some rules and committing outright treason. His initial impressions of the Vandals painted a picture of a tragic and neglected mech regiment. Now though, Ves wondered if the Mech Corps might have a good reason to keep the Vandals at arm's length.

"The Mech Corps isn't in the habit of fooling around unless it concerns internal rivalry."

It was obvious that the Flagrant Vandals fell outside of the dominant factions in the Mech Corps. They stood on their own and had no one powerful to back them up. Even their own division pushed them aside.

It couldn't be helped if the Vandals became disillusioned at being kept on a leash. The only problem was that every mech designer was confined to a small part of the massive factory ship. Besides those who liaised with the mech pilots and mech designers, no one had gotten a glimpse of what happened at the heart of the Vandals.

Ves supposed that he could have tried to pry some information from Alloc and Professor Velten, but he didn't dare pull off any tricks in their presence. Both were not only busy, but they could also be remarkably perceptive if they directed their full attention to him. The only saving grace was that they prioritized their own work over looking over the shoulders of their subordinates.

"Am I in a dead end?"

He was unwilling to let his inquiry end so soon without grasping even a hint of the truth. Though everything seemed fine and nothing might be wrong, he would never feel at ease among the Vandals as long as his questions remained unanswered.

"I need an opportunity."

So far, he failed to receive any dispensations from Alloc, but Ves did not intend to give up now. Perhaps he needed to work a little longer in order to appear dependable enough to be sent on liaison assignments.

For now, the key was to excel in his work. After squaring away his doubts and uncertainties, Ves dove back into his work. This time, his results improved, and Ves managed to optimize the Hellcat design in a marginally better way.

Just before the start of Professor Velten's next conference, Ves handed over the final set of solutions to Alloc. They were less dramatic than he hoped, but all of his solutions should be sound.

Alloc only briefly skimmed through his work. "I'll take them up to the Professor the next time I see her, but you did a good job."

"Thank you, sir. I was hoping for better, though."

The Journeyman released a cynical smile. "We all do, but the Hellcat does everything in its way to thwart our efforts."

In the end, Ves grudgingly received Alloc's approval to continue working on his own pace. This was important to Ves because he would be able to continue to pick out the best assignments.

At the next conference meeting, a routine of sorts had already settled. The Professor made some inconsequential announcements while the Journeyman walked to the front to mention their latest excuses why they hadn't made any better progress.

Professor Velten appeared to be paying serious attention, but Ves questioned whether her mind was even present. Sometimes the old lady doddored off.

After the conference, Professor Velten suddenly turned around and called up Ves. "Mr. Larkinson! Please come with me!"

For a moment, Ves thought he had been caught. Yet no one really paid any attention to the call besides Laida and Pierce. With some reluctance, Ves filed into the Professor's private office and sat down in front of the Senior Mech Designer.

She immediately broached the topic as soon as he sat down. "It has come to my attention that you are a relatively successful mech designer."

Why did she ask him that?

"Success is a difficult term to quantify, but arguably yes, I do believe I have done well."

"When your records first came into my view, I did not think much of your prior experience. An Apprentice with only two original designs under his belt is barely a genuine mech designer. So it is a surprise for me to hear that you are one of the primary mech designers of a design that's been all the rage in the market right now."

"Huh? Ah, what I mean is, which design is selling well?"

"The Crystal Lord, your landbound rifleman mech design."

### Chapter 435 The Cage

Ever since Ves entered the clutches of the Mech Corps, he became isolated to the outside galaxy. In an age where spying and leaking sensitive data was trivially easy, the military organization undertook extreme measures in order to keep their rank and file from revealing anything they shouldn't have.

While the Flagrant Vandals might not see eye-to-eye with the upper hierarchy, they happened to be in total agreement with regards to operational security.

As a mech regiment that regularly invaded Vesian space, any incautious leaks might even devastate their numbers. Therefore, access points to the outside galaxy was extremely limited and heavily monitored. The moment Ves revealed a hint of propriety, his entire terminal would shut off.

Thus, over the past couple of months, Ves had no idea how the LMC fared in his absence. In truth, he didn't really worry about their fate. The company was in decent hands and it offered two solid original designs in its catalog.

The Blackbeak medium knight already proved to be an enduring seller. Even if the market for offensive knights started to become somewhat saturated, demand for the LMC's homebuilt silver label editions was projected to remained high for at least a couple more years.

Ves was much less certain about the newly-introduced Crystal Lord design. Though it carried over much of the qualities of the Blackbeak, the different

type and the range of improvements he incorporated in the design made it an unquestionably more promising mech.

The Blackbeak was meant to compete in a niche, while the Crystal Lord had been designed to challenge the dominant mainstream mechs that was responsible for the bulk of the sales for rifleman mechs.

It had a lot of things going for it. The premium licenses and materials allowed it to outperform cheaper models and Ves had Superpublished the design on top of that. Its current performance parameters fit well in a multi-year conflict with the Vesians.

More crucially, the Crystal Lord was the first design that broke into the coveted B-grade for the X-Factor. While Ves did not truly understand what this new height of X-Factor meant, he bet that the mech pilots who got to pilot a Crystal Lord must be feeling very privileged about piloting such a smooth machine.

Lastly, the Crystal Lord also incorporated some gimmicks based off alien crystal technology. Though it was hardly anything groundbreaking compared to the heights that humanity had reached, crystal technology like this was rare in a backwater state like the Bright Republic. It should perform particularly well against mechs that predominantly relied on lasers.

All in all, the Crystal Lord possessed all of the elements to be a breakout success.

Yet even as Ves had high hopes for his second original design, the mech market for rifleman mechs was extremely competitive. Realistically, all three labels of the Crystal Lord should have priced themselves out of consideration for most potential buyers.

Therefore, it came at a surprise to him that Professor Velten indicated otherwise.

"May I know how well my Crystal Lord design is doing?"

Though Ves faced heavy restrictions in terms of how much information he could get in touch with, the Senior Mech Designer faced no such constraints. She easily answered his question.

"The Crystal Lord has been something of an anomaly when you first released it onto the market. They didn't know what to make of it, and sales have stayed modest for the first month. Expert opinions about your design is decidedly mixed, with many of them recommending their audience to stay away."

To an outside pundit who had never seen a Crystal Lord in person, its value proposition seemed like a bad deal. Rather than break the bank by buying a single overpriced rifleman mech, it was much more efficient to buy two affordable rifleman mechs for the same amount of credits.

"What changed since then, professor?"

She eyed him with a curious look. "The early adopters of your models discovered two advantages that aren't present in many other mechs. First, your gimmick is a lot more useful than anyone has thought. Wielding a lighter laser rifle and possessing more advanced defenses against energy weapons on the chest helps keep the mechs alive during the most intensive engagements."

"The Crystal Lord has seen action?"

"Vesian raids have intensified. They have likely been emboldened by the daring raids of the 3rd Imodris Legion. The pressure we are facing back at the home front is immense. Mercenaries are forced to repel small raiding parties that have sneaked through the gaps in our defense lines."

Though Ves paid the most attention to the Crystal Mech, he couldn't help but feel a little reassured from the way Professor Velten spoke about Republic space. At least outwardly, she still displayed kinship with their state.

"The Mech Legion fields a substantial number of mechs armed with laser weapons. Against these mechs, your Crystal Lord has stood out as the mech with one of the highest rates of survival. Normal rifleman mechs regularly get trashed, that's why they are so cheap. Yours is a little more effective than usual into keeping it and its pilot alive, and that ends up amounting to a substantial amount of cost savings."

Ves nodded in a modest manner. "That is also my intention, ma'am. The Crystal Lord is supposed to be a long-term investment. Its true value will manifest over the years. You mentioned a second reason for the surging demand for my mech. Can you tell me what it is?"

Her eyes grew a little sharper at that, and she tried to peer into his soul through his eyes. Ves carefully maintained his posture and met her gaze with a neutral look.

"Every mech pilot that has ever piloted a copy of the Crystal Lord has turned into its raving fans. It has garnered a die-hard following that is continuing to grow the more people get in touch with it, no matter the shape it comes in. Bronze label, silver label, gold label, every edition of your mech exhibit the same concerning trend. Even the virtual copies of the Crystal Lord is distressingly effective in converting people into your fans."

It should have been good news for Ves, but instead he started to sweat inside. Had he overdone it? During the early testing, the X-Factor never exhibited such radical effects on a mech pilot's psyche. "Are people accusing me of brainwashing my pilots?"

Fortunately, Velten shook her head. "This is not a repeat of the Farund Affair, if that is what you are worried about. Even though the pundits can say whatever they want, the truth is that the Mech Trade Association validated your design. This carries a lot of weight among us. To be sure that your company and its partners haven't been producing mechs that deviated from

the official design, the MTA has dispatched some investigators and inspected their premises. All of the companies involved have been cleared."

Ves knew that he was innocent, but the MTA didn't know that. They needed to verify his company's products and their operations on their own in order to determine the facts.

"I take it no one believes my company has tampered with the neural interfaces?"

"Yes. The controversy has died down after several critics have attempted to dismantle the neural interfaces. In hindsight, their exuberance can be attributed to how extensively you've met their demands. You possess an extremely keen understanding of what mech pilots seek from their machines."

Was Professor Velten probing him whether he benefited from a Mastery?

Ves instinctively moved to deny the implicit suspicion, but quickly hesitated.

The reason why he would want to keep it under wraps because he wouldn't be able to explain how he got to enjoy this exclusive privilege that Master Mech Designers only reserved for their prized direct disciples. As someone who fell outside that coveted category, Ves shouldn't have received so much nurturing.

Yet did that matter if Professor Velten very likely wouldn't find out the truth? Mastery was a sensitive topic at best, and those who experienced it already showed its benefits through their work. Velten had no reason to follow up because she could already access his top level design schematics from the MTA and see for herself.

His response to this situation was critically important and might govern the rest of his stay with the Vandals. There was a risk that the truth might leak out that he gained his Masteries through a more dubious source. Yet Ves deemed the risk to be acceptable in the face of what was at stake.

His investigation into the truth of the Vandals had come to a screeching halt due to the restrictions he faced. This was a chance for him to loosen some of those restrictions and grant him wider access to the secretive mech regiment.

"This is supposed to be a secret, but my designs are benefiting from the fact that I have gained two Masteries, one for knight mechs and one for rifleman mechs."

Velten did not respond with any surprise. Instead, she raised a single eyebrow. "How curious. If the Mech Corps knew what kind of mech designer you are, they would have never pushed you into our hands."

"It's not something I wish to advertise."

She grinned. "Indeed. Well, one mech regiment's misfortune is another blessing to the Flagrant Vandals. You've demonstrated through your work in the private sector that you deeply understand the demands of those we serve, the mech pilots who bravely pilot their mechs into the most dangerous situations imaginable. Out of all three of the design teams under my wing, no mech designer can say they have acquired a Mastery. Not even I have enjoyed such a privilege..."

Velten sounded somewhat regretful about that. Ves felt it was a shame as well. At her age, her design philosophy had already taken shape. She missed out on a lot during her formative years. As talented as she was back in her youth, if she acquired some Masteries at that early stage, her career would have skyrocketed, and there was a very real chance that she could have advanced to Master.

"What do you have in mind for me, professor?"

"Mr. Larkinson, I see now that your talents are grossly underutilized. The success of your Crystal Lord is the strongest proof of your abilities. Did you

know that your company has shook hands with over five third-party manufacturers, and they still can't keep up with demand?"

Hearing that almost frightened Ves out of his chair. What was Calsie doing?! Didn't he tell her to pick her partners carefully? Going in bed with five different mech manufacturers so soon was too fast! How would the LMC be able to control the quality of their output?

"I did not know that. I feel rather troubled, actually."

"Plans change. I can't tell you much about this, but I believe your company is on the right track. That is all you should know. The Mech Corps maintains a policy of isolating its mech designers from the news of their own companies. You are working for us, not the market."

"I understand." Ves nodded. That made a lot of sense.

"In light of your newly unearthed strengths and your diligent work ethic you've shown up to this point, I plan to elevate your position under this department in order to best take advantage of your unique talents."

"What will my new position entail?"

"You are to be appointed as our permanent liaison to the mech pilots that utilize our homegrown designs. As someone who knows mech pilots the best, you are eminently suitable to understand their specific wishes and convey them to our design teams. Take the rest of the day off. You'll start on your new assignment tomorrow."

"Thank you, professor!"

This was exactly what he wanted to hear! Though the manner in which he gained this assignment was a little strange, he nonetheless escaped the cage the Vandals set among most of its mech designers.

Staying in this cage for months on end seemed like torture to Ves. Though he loved to design mechs as any other designer in the teams, he would have gone crazy if he worked with numbers and figures all day.

Ves was a very hands-on designer. Without seeing a mech in the flesh, he would never be able to understand it as deeply as he wanted to. Now, he finally got the chance to see what the Vandals were really like, starting with the mech pilots that formed the core of the regiment.

### **Chapter 436 Left Behind**

The Bright Republic truly transitioned into a war footing by now. Spending on consumer goods decreased while spending on all things related to war ballooned. Prices of basic goods already started to rise as everyone started to stock up on basic goods.

Food, water, weapons and more began to be sold at greater quantities. This came at the cost of luxury goods, whose manufacturers found it increasingly difficult to convince the citizens to spend their money lavishly.

"Will luxury be able to feed me when our planet is blockaded? Will the most fashionable pair of shoes around be able to defend my children if the Vesians want to take them away?"

Most of the newer companies started to go bust while the older, more conservative companies endured. They had gone through this rodeo many times before, and squirreled away lots of liquidity and resources beforehand. This largely mitigated the economic impact on the Bright Republic's economy, though a downturn in activity was inevitable.

Although the Republic did not suffer a lot of material damage in the opening stages of the war, the damage to morale was more significant. Public confidence had taken a large nosedive ever since the 3rd Imodris Legion stomped their boots all over of the Bentheim region.

While the aggressive Vesians didn't have the guts to attack a stronghold, their strategy of attacking many lightly-defended targets succeeded in harming the spirit of the citizens who lived on those same rural planets.

That the Mech Corps never caught up to Lady Amalia's legion before it successfully returned to Vesian space really struck as a blow to the Mech Corps. The will of the people was a very ephemeral entity. It could swing up and down depending on the most notable events.

Right now, everyone went about their lives with their heads bent a little down. Ever since the war broke out, the Vesians had marched through tons of border systems. While the Mech Corps achieved some victories here and there, the larger trend made the Vesians seem as if they were on fire.

The veterans and the elderly knew that this wasn't anything unusual. The Mech Corps purposely drew back their lines and consolidated their defenses. Their counterattack would come sooner or later after the Mech Legion ran out of steam. The Vesians always had a tendency to overextend.

"You ain't seen nothing yet, son. The Vesian bastards don't move as one. Their nobles are a bunch of jackals who only think for themselves. Just you wait. They'll split up eventually."

In the meantime, many planets increased their defenses and started to recruit more militia from the populace, even if they didn't possess the right aptitude to pilot mechs.

Though it was a generally accepted fact that a non-mech force would never be able to defeat a force of mechs, norms still played a vitally important role in many areas. Besides acting in a support capacity, regular humans also fought as infantry or in manned vehicles such as tanks and aircraft.

After all, a mech force was good at destroying things, but they weren't too suitable in occupying conquered planets and couldn't reach everywhere.

Infantry, tanks and aircraft might not play the main role, but they provided an effective form of support to any mech force.

However, recruitment was heavily stymied by the fact that it wasn't very popular to join these branches of service. Pretty much every action drama that have been broadcast in the last four-hundred years depicted them as easily-beaten foils to any enemy mechs that wandered along.

If the citizens wouldn't volunteer, then the state just had to push them along. Already, several waves of conscription swept the populace. They mostly picked up the unemployed youth and young adults who had been laid off when the companies they worked at shuttered their doors or downsized their operations due to the difficult economic conditions.

This further depressed the general mood in the Republic and made it seem awfully empty at times.

On Cloudy Curtain, Calsie watched over the premises of the Mech Nursery. The white-faced office structures blended harmoniously with the trees planted in their midst. They also neatly hid the ugly forms of Sanyal-Ablin's defensive turrets.

She looked a far cry from the college graduate from before. She underwent a minor makeover that made her appear more mature, though the wisps of youth was still present under her makeup. She wore a white power suit that mentally stiffened her spine. She sorely needed all the help she could get in order to browbeat the different interest groups involved with the LMC to comply with her directives.

Somehow, she managed. Running a company as its temporary boss wasn't easy, but she enjoyed plenty of help.

Under her tentative leadership, the company largely followed the same trend as before. The Living Mech Corporation had just expanded its number of

production lines from three to five. This allowed the company to produce the silver label Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords without excessively neglecting either of the two highly sought after mech models.

The doors to the penthouse office suddenly opened, allowing Melkor to enter the expansive space. The maturing Larkinson was the only other person besides Calsie who possessed unfettered access to the office that used to be occupied by Ves.

"How is the training coming along, commander?"

"The 'rookies' we've recruited have are starting to show signs of advanced coordination, ma'am. They've always been ready for battle, since we only signed up experienced mech pilots, but it's hard work to get them to unlearn their previous routines and get them to adopt our own."

"Will the Avatars of Myth be able to repel a company of the 5th Vavulan Chasseurs if they come again?"

"Not quite, ma'am. The Chasseurs are a battle-hardened mech pilots with centuries of tradition to guide them. They aren't pushovers and they won't be cowed by the current state of my men. It will take years of training to get to that point. The only edge we have is our advanced mechs."

The Avatars of Myth employed the Crystal Lord in greater numbers than anyone else. Not only did they possess four exclusive gold label copies, they also fielded a whopping twenty silver label Crystal Lords.

Fabricating them all out of the LMC's own pocket cost the company a lot. Almost the entire board of directors howled when Calsie and Melkor came up with the plan, but they pushed through regardless of the pain. At least Grandpa Benjamin remained ambivalent about the matter.

Naturally, the LMC also spent itself broke by expanding their number of production lines. They had no choice but to go further into debt, with the excuse that the company would be better off with the extra defenses.

Though the LMC's mountain of debt had ballooned, the production lines had been put to good use. Mechs started flying off the premises as fast as they could produce, and the extra per-unit licensing fees streaming in from the third-party manufacturers did much to reassure the frazzled Financial Department.

"Do you think we've moved too fast?" Calsie asked as she turned away from the window and its marvellous view. "I've taken the company into a direction that won't make Ves very happy. We're knee-deep in debt and heavily reliant on our partners to keep the sales volume of our prodcut lines high."

Melkor dismissively huffed. "Ves is a little too selfish for his own good. He expects everything to dance at the palm of his hands. I'm not an expert in business, but from what I see, the faster we get things done, the better we're all off. We needed those mechs in our hands as fast as possible."

"Why so? Are the Vesians winning?"

"Not as such. Simply think of it as a contingency. It's better to go into debt and have the mechs ready than the other way around. The previous raid on the Mech Nursery has made that more than clear to me. What does a healthy balance sheet mean against the Mech Legion? No matter how exemplary the LMC handles its finances, it's of little use when civilization gets thrown out the window in order to make way for war. The only thing that counts in a fight is how many mechs and weapons we possess. That's the true measure of wealth in my eyes. Ma'am."

"Excellently said, commander. Money that's sitting in the bank is of no use at all when the Mech Legion comes again. Only money that is spent on

increasing our strength can make a difference during wartime." Calsie replied with a smile. She always felt uneasy about her decisions, but Melkor's reasoning provided her with the mental crutch she needed to alleviate her guilt. "I'm sure that Ves won't be pleased if he returns from his tour of service with the Mech Nursery in ruins."

Compared to this piece of mind, dealing with difficult and pushy creditors hardly seemed like a bother to her now. "Why have you come? Our next scheduled meeting is in three days."

"It's about the Crystal Lord. I've finished my own investigation about its... effects."

"Oh? Do tell me the results."

As the mech pilot of one of the coveted gold label Crystal Lord mechs, Melkor possessed a unique opportunity to experience the best of what Ves had fashioned into being.

"Piloting the Crystal Lord is an entire experience. There is nothing routine about this mech. Everything I enter the cockpit and before I even engage the neural interface, I feel as if my mech is already welcoming me home."

"What do you mean? Are you saying that the Crystal Lord is running an AI even in its active state?"

"Nothing like that, ma'am. It's... hard to describe. I can feel from my heart that I belong to my mech, and my mech belongs to me. Even now, I can't bear to be away from my precious mech."

"That sounds unhealthy. Have you checked with the doctors?"

"We have performed more than enough tests to rule out any explicit brainwashing. In that, our investigations concur with the ones done by the Mech Corps and any other pundit who have tested this out."

"Then I don't see what the problem is. Certainly, the reason why you feel addicted to your mech is because it's a really good machine, right?"

"Right. Something like that. My apologies, ma'am. I'm not the best with words."

"No need to apologise. You are doing good work as the commander of a company-sized outfit."

The two discussed a little bit more about the Crystal Lord. Since the Avatars possessed the largest amount of Crystal Lords, they gained a lot of practical insights about the model. Melkor conveyed what they learned to Calsie so she could use the information to tweak the marketing of the product or introduce some other changes.

As they spoke, they kept a respectful distance from each other, both physically and status-wise. For whatever reason, Ves chose to appoint Calsie at the helm, so she took precedence over the mech pilot.

Melkor didn't mind. As long as Calsie did a decent job and avoided steering the LMC into disaster, he wouldn't mind taking orders from her. Of course, he constantly kept his eye on her in the event she took the wrong turn.

"How is the ship component of the Avatars doing? Your force is about to receive the first Trieste-class light carrier from the shipyard, if I recall. Are you prepared?"

"To be honest, no." Melkor shook his head. "We're having difficulty recruiting competent and reliable spacers to staff a single ship, let alone two. Fleet Commander Rofane is doing his best, but the hiring market is practically dried up. Anyone with the skills to serve on a spaceship have already been snapped up by companies and outfits left and right."

"This doesn't sound very good." Calsie frowned. "Can't we hire from abroad?"

"I'm not very keen to hire foreign spacers. The chance of something going wrong is unacceptably high. I'd rather keep the light carriers in a depot collecting dust than rush them into use while they are riddled with hidden threats."

"What does Rofane think?"

"The fleet commander is less than enthused by my opinions. In his view, spacers are spacers. Once they sail the endless night, they have renounced their ties to the land. He's a true-blooded spaceborn ship driver, that's for sure."

Fleet Commander Rofane had been recommended to lead the ship contingent of the Avatars by Captain Silvestra. He was an old but boisterous barrel of a man who worked for several mercenary corps in his lifetime.

Though he was highly competent and his record was straight, he possessed rather strong beliefs about the superiority of spaceborn humans over their landbound counterparts. Keeping the outspoken fleet commander in line was very troublesome to Melkor.

#### **Chapter 437 Shifting Agendas**

"On some days, I regret accepting Rofane into the fold." Melkor continued.

"He's constantly pushing me to lift the restrictions on recruiting foreigners so he can hire more spaceborn spacers. I don't want to make the problem any worse than it is right now with him alone, so I've been fobbing him off."

"I'm not sure if Ves will mind too much if you recruit some people who come from another state. As long as they aren't Vesians and are willing to commit to the Avatars, they should be fine and dandy."

Melkor shook his head. "I can't take the risk, ma'am. Although Ves explicitly set up the Avatars of Myth to serve as his personal force, true loyalty can't be bought. We are much more like a mercenary corps in that regard. Nationality

is the only thing we have in common. Once I throw that away, the Avatars would have nothing else to bind them all together."

As much as Melkor wanted to loosen the reins, he resisted the temptation. It was better to solve the problem over time rather than commit to an irreversible course of action.

"For now, we have no need for you to deploy the Avatars elsewhere, but that might change in the future."

For now, the Avatars of Myth had been tasked with defending the Mech Nursery. The lack of ships didn't affect their operations as long as they stuck to this mission.

Still, circumstances changed, and if a crisis ever happened in a different star system, the Avatars would be forced to rely on others to transport their mechs to their destination. This took way too much time and money, and transport services generally refused to convey a shipment of mechs into danger. This highlighted the eventual need to own a wholly-owned carrier fleet.

Now that he was here, Melkor might as well get some other things off his chest. "By the way, though I try to stay out of your business decisions, aren't you intertwining the LMC a little too deeply with Cloudy Curtain?"

Almost as soon as Ves entered the Mech Corps and dropped off the grid, Calsie implemented a fairly significant policy change within the company.

Under the reign of Ves, the LMC had always stood aloof from local politics and society. Besides settling on the planet, pushing some marketing and paying some taxes, the company didn't make itself felt.

Calsie changed all of that. She rejected the premise that the LMC benefited best if it took on a completely neutral stance. Instead, she firmly pushed the LMC into a path of greater integration and cooperation with local stakeholders.

This policy of engagement took on many forms. For example, as deep as the LMC was already in debt, it spared some cash to subsidize the underfunded mech academies of Freslin. The institutions all praised the LMC for the much-needed rain of funds.

On a higher level, the LMC also started to support some of the initiatives of the newly emboldened Pioneers, mostly by putting in a good word for the business-friendly activists. With the Greens and the White Doves suffering from an unprecedented amount of indignation, the Pioneers was at the cusp of taking over the thoroughly discredited Planetary Assembly.

To Melkor, the growing relationship between the LMC and the Pioneers started to reek.

"I don't have to justify my decisions to you, but if you must know, a company can't settle on a planet and pretend its a silo. The LMC is the most prominent company on Cloudy Curtain. How can it not give back to the community that has welcomed it with open arms?"

"I wouldn't exactly describe it in that way, ma'a'm."

"Then let me rephrase it in a blunter manner." Calsie spoke. "The politics are rather turbulent right now. While the Republic's investigators ultimately failed to find the culprits of the self-sabotage incident, everyone and their dogs know it's the White Doves who are at fault. While they can still rely on the support of hardcore pacifists, average people have left their side in droves. This is the time the Pioneers need to make their case. As long as we can help them overcome this hurdle, the LMC will be rewarded with countless of benefits!"

"I take it you will receive some benefits as well?"

"This isn't about me." Calsie shook her head. "This is about the future of the LMC. The company can't ignore politics, and the Pioneers can't achieve their aims without some help from local businesses. Only through combining our

strengths will we both be able to achieve our goals and better everyone's lives. This is called corporate social responsibility."

The woman sounded so slick when she said those words that Melkor could hardly think of a retort. Melkor knew that Calsie had always been connected with the Pioneers, but the way she flagrantly defied Ves in keeping the LMC neutral was something else. She made a very persuasive case why this was the best decision.

"Don't take it too far. When Ves returns, he'll have some words to say to you."

"I am aware of the consequences, commander. However, may I remind you that Ves didn't put a bot in charge of the LMC. He wanted a human to represent his wishes because he needed someone who could think in this position. From a logical perspective, there are way too many reasons why we should get in bed with the Pioneers and not enough reasons to stick to ourselves."

"If that is what you think, ma'am."

Melkor couldn't argue any further because the unofficial partnership paid a lot of dividends. They already got a lot of things done, the most important of which was to steer the decision to rebuild Cloudy Curtain's spaceport at Freslin instead of Orinoco. This provided a lot of convenience to the LMC as it constantly shipped in raw materials and shipped out finished mechs.

As Calsie and Melkor discussed some other matters, life went on at Cloudy Curtain.

One of the more impactful ways the LMC intruded into the sphere of the local inhabitants was that it took over or set up various businesses in Freslin under an LMC-branded investment group.

They mainly took on the form of sports and social clubs, as culture was something that Cloudy Curtain had always been lagging behind. The LMC

also took over the faltering businesses of local craftsmen and entrepreneurs who offered something unique but never gained enough exposure and market reach.

The city of Freslin lapped it all up. The entire local region experienced an upsurge in interest as the LMC single-handedly brought up its educational, cultural and business standards.

"That mech company is the best thing to grace our planet since our founding!"

"Mr. Larkinson is a hero to us! Even as he's gotten rich, he hasn't forgotten about the little man!"

"We should kick the White Doves off our planet! To think they want to deprive us of all of these benefits. When I think back on how I supported them in the past, I should have deserved a kick in the head!"

While Freslin experienced an upsurge, the nominal capital of Cloudy Curtain suffered from a worsening sentiment. None of the cheer from Freslin had managed to reach as far as Orinoco. As the rescue services excavated the corpses and the construction companies cleaned up the ruins, the city was at a crossroads on how to proceed.

The average citizens started to lose faith in the ruling coalition, and that was really bad, because the people in Orinoco used to be their strongest supporters.

The Greens began to distance themselves from their bosom buddy. Although the Greens and the White Doves were often mentioned in the same sentence as if they were a single entity, in truth the Greens believed in somewhat distinct ideals.

This was why they also escaped much of the blame that had befallen the White Doves. Pretty much everyone in Orinoco believed they had been behind the bombs that exploded the spaceport and headquarters of several

important businesses in the city. Though they full-heartedly denied the accusations, public opinion did not care for the absence of proof.

The White Doves possessed the right motive, and that was enough to establish a link.

"Look at how Freslin is partying every day. Why can't we get some of that love?"

"As long as the White Doves are in charge over here, there's no way in hell the LMC will think about us."

"Maybe it's time the White Doves take a hike and build a hippy enclave in the wilderness. There's plenty of open space on our planet. They can pack up their stupid beliefs and take them away from here so we can finally enjoy some economic development!"

"Let's kick out the Greens as well! They love their forests so much that they can build a city in the trees!"

As much as public sentiment had turned against the established powers, change was rather slow in coming. Cloudy Curtain was still coming off a state of emergency, and a war raged on the wider Republic. For now, the ruling coalition earned a grace period which they could use to shore up their faltering support.

In the background, the representatives of the two dominant farming consortiums looked at the changes being wrought on Cloudy Curtain. Their expressions didn't look happy.

"We have been hiding our claws for far too long. Whoever among us who predicted that the LMC would stay a small and niche mech manufacturer has obviously missed the mark."

"How can I know that this devilish Mr. Larkinson is such an abnormally good mech designer?! The speed in which he progressed is inhuman! Don't forget that all you initially dismissed him as a threat early on!"

"Now now, settle down. This is no time for recriminations. Despite the worrying trends happening on our planet, it is not a given that we should make a move."

Someone from the Luvon Consortium stood up. "We can't stand by and let the White Doves collapse on itself!"

"We can and we will." A powerful voice from the Raleigh Consortium interjected. "No matter how much we dislike the direction that Cloudy Curtain is heading, we should adapt to the times. Our previous posture of total isolation is a mistake."

"You are sounding dangerously like a Pioneer."

"Pioneer, Green, White Dove, these are all labels. What matters is keeping our Consortiums relevant. As much as the LMC sucks up all the spotlight right now, the farms of Cloudy Curtain will always be its main export product."

The conference fell to a momentary silence. Tension ratcheted up between the Raleigh Consortium, which favored the Greens, and the Luvon Consortium, who supported the White Doves.

Eventually, someone from the Luvons spoke. "We are not willing to let our political enterprise fall like that. To that end, we have prepared a plan that can reverse our setbacks and return the planet to the old order."

"What are you cooking up?"

"Something drastic. I'm afraid I can't say. Leaking the details would be devastating to us and our cause. Let us take care of everything. I can guarantee you that the LMC will cease to exist when we enact our plans."

The conference ended with those ominous words. The Raleigh Family exhibited a lot of worry about the plans of their historical allies, but without any further information, they could do nothing but stand from the sidelines.

"The Luvons talk big, but they are the ones who let the LMC grow from a cub into a tiger."

"These long years of peace on our planet has ossified their minds. Maybe we should seriously consider the overtures from the Pioneers from now on."

"Let us not act too hastily. I'm not sure what the Luvons intend to do, but it shouldn't concern our interests. No matter who comes out on top, we should wait until the outcome is clear."

"As much as the alliance between the LMC and the Pioneers is growing in strength, the Raleighs and their White Doves are stronger than they appear. It's not a given that they will lose. It depends on how much strength they want to reveal to the galaxy."

#### **Chapter 438 Barras**

At the border regions, the war raged on. Occasionally, the Vesians pushed forth hard, leading to battles that engulfed thousands of mechs at once.

The outcomes of those battles were decidedly mixed. Most of the times, even if the Brighters repelled the Vesians, they sustained just as much losses. Both sides would be economically ruined if they continued to lose so many mechs at once, so after the initial pushes, the Vesians slowed their pace by a little bit.

Nonetheless, the Vesian aggression could not be contained. The need for the nobles to one-up each other and distinguish themselves in battle led to grueling back-to-back battles in some of the hotspots of the border regions. Planets like Citadel Havensworth became littered with so much wrecks that neither side could afford the time to salvage them all.

It was said that during a war, the true facets of man would be revealed. Many mech pilots who thought themselves heroes turned out to be the first to eject. Others went through life without challenges, but measured up in the face of adversity, such as Ghanso Larkinson of the 1st Volari Starhawks.

Most mech pilots didn't exhibit any differences. They knew their calling in life and signed up to pilot a mech knowing that they would face the Vesians in battle. Even someone who disdained the war such as Melinda Larkinson resolved to do their duty.

Despite their noble striving, the war did not go in the Bright Republic's favor. The Vesians scored several important victories that brought strategic star systems into their fold. Each star system that fell paved the way for deeper incursions into Republic space.

One remote star system close to the border faced a small but determined assault from a Vesian mech regiment known as the 3rd Kallas Carabiniers.

The Carabiniers heavily favored medium rifleman mechs in their mech lineup. Versatile and deadly in great numbers, they trained extensively and came up with many advanced tactics to maximize the potential of their ranged mechs.

Right now, the Herendal System which held a modest amount of mines suffered an invasion by this regiment. The Mech Corps only stationed a couple of mech companies on the planet, and none of them were line units capable of facing the Vesians in a head-on clash.

The only way the defenders of the only inhabited planet of Herendal could keep their grip on the system was to employ a large amount of mercenaries.

Several large-scale mercenary corps answered the call. Though the mission entailed a lot of risks, the they payoff was big so long as the Vesians didn't invade.

With regards to missions, every mercenary corps hoped to spend some months in quiet, boring patrols. Though they earned their living from their battle capabilities, fighting the Mech Legion was a daunting prospect.

In general, the Mech Legion did not often bother to invade small, unimportant star systems. Mercenary commanders relied on this fact to gamble on their missions. If they lucked out, they enjoyed a nice vacation while earning lots of pay to boot. If their luck fell short, then they'd be forced to back up their commitments and do their best to fight off the Vesians.

Barras Swan happened to have chosen badly. As the commander of a medium-sized band of mechs called the Orange Liskers, he chose to gamble on a quiet posting to the Herendal System. Though the star system was a little closer to the frontlines than he liked, the Liskers needed the pay as it went deep into debt to replace its previous battle losses.

"I should have never bought this mech! Though if I did, I would have never experienced this beauty either!"

The reason why Barras was so desperate to earn a large reward was because he impulsively ordered a copy of the Crystal Lord.

Even though he only purchased the bronze label version of this line of mechs, the expenditure almost broke the Liskers, with many of the rank and file grumbling why Barras spent so much but only kept the best for himself.

He was guilty in charge. The truth was that Barras felt tired about piloting another subpar rifleman mech that cost around 20-30 million credits. He thought about buying a new mech in the price segment above that figure, but when he heard about the amazing capabilities of the Crystal Lord, he settled his eyes on the ominous-looking model as soon as possible.

Some days, he regretted his purchase, and on other days he felt thankful about it. For now, Barras felt both as his battered Crystal Lord continued to run through the brownish forest of this terraformed planet.

Barras panted inside the cockpit of his Crystal Lord. "It's been two days already! How can they still be in pursuit?!"

The swift and nimble mechs of the 3rd Kallas Carabiniers landed on Herendal with a splash. They immediately smashed apart the mech companies of the Mech Corps before turning their firepower to the mercenaries that tried to come to the aid of the defending mechs.

All hell broke loose. The critical fault that brought the defenders down was that they consisted of many different outfits. The Mech Corps occasionally bossed them around, but they lacked convincing power due to their limited numbers.

Right now, the Carabiniers succeeded in smashing hundreds of mechs at a time by defeating the different outfits one by one. They actively shied away from larger concentration of mercs, and only engaged when they outnumbered their prey.

It was a very despicable way to fight, but it worked. The Carabiniers moved fast and managed to hit the outfits before they finished their preparations. Right now, they employed their considerable edge in speed into hunting down the stragglers that split in every direction and ran for the hills.

"Goddammit, I should have never gave in to my greed!"

A scattering of laser beams struck from behind. The raking fire briefly added another scorch mark to his Crystal Lord's back. Yet remarkably, the rear armor largely held up. The thin layer of Veltrex armor proved to be highly effective in absorbing short bursts of energy weapon fire. As long as Barras immediately jinked his mech, he could make sure that no single spot on his mech suffered from a sustained burst of fire.

"At least I'm getting my money's worth!"

The combination of armor and speed on the Crystal Lord allowed for unexpected synergies. It performed extremely well against laser weapons, which happened to be the mainstay weapon of the Kallas Carabiniers. The Crystal Lord lasted much longer against them for that reason alone.

Still, that hadn't been enough to turn the tide in the opening battle of the Orange Liskers. Barras had to witness first-hand how each of his trusted comrades-in-arms faltered due to the disparity in discipline and battle spirit. Some of them managed to eject, while others breathed their last on Herendal.

Tears began to well up in his eyes, but Barras quickly shook them away. Everyone who took up the mercenary life accepted the risks that came with this vocation. It was a rough and dangerous life, but one which mech pilots also enjoyed a lot of freedom.

Thoughts of vengeance percolated in his mind. Barras checked his fuel and battery reserves and noted that both were critically low. Even if his mech provided him with an amazing amount of endurance, two days of constant chasing took their toll.

"I can't run any further without shaking off my pursuers."

The Crystal Lord slowed down in its steps as Barras prepared his exhausted mind for yet another battle, which might be his last this time.

The pursuing mechs emerged from the trees, and as soon as they got a clear view of the Crystal Lord, they fired their laser rifles at it without hesitation.

Some of the laser fire raked the crystal embedded in the center of the chest, while the rest of the energy splashed harmlessly against the armor of the premium mech, though some sections of plating started to get dangerously thin.

Barras ignored incoming fire and aimed carefully before shooting a high-powered beam from his surprisingly slim rifle. The laser hit one of the Carabinier mech and burned a nasty gash at its leg armor. Though the laser failed to penetrate the internals, another hit might finish the job.

As Barras waited for his rifle to cycle away the heat, he immersed himself in his mech and moved nimbly between the trees. Though the tree trunks looked substantial, they could not be used as cover as most laser beams instantly burned through them. Barras mainly took the presence of the trees as mental comfort.

"Three opponents. They've been running for a while as well. They don't look as fresh as before."

The Carabiniers had split up their forces in order to mop up the routed defenders. While the models of the Carabiniers couldn't rival the longevity of the Crystal Lord, they regularly rotated the mechs on the field by deploying transports in the air. The fact that they secured orbital and aerial supremacy meant that they could shuttle around their mechs with near-impunity.

However, they still needed to be cautious in the presence of an enemy ranged mech like the Crystal Lord. Barras almost managed to burn through the armor of one transport that strayed too near.

"If my estimates on their timing is correct, then this trio should have been switched out in an hour. This is the best time for me to thwart their pursuit!"

Barras hated himself for getting away when much of his men and women got killed or captured by the Carabiniers. He channeled his fury through his mech, who seemed to be as eager for battle as him. Several strange insights started to flow past his mind as his mind studied the terrain and his opponents for any potential opportunities.

"There!"

Barras drove his Crystal Lord back, which sprung like a gymnast as it turned around and ran towards a certain destination. The three Carabiniers jumped in pursuit.

The Crystal Lord didn't need to run very far before it reached a rushing river. Barras hesitated for a moment, but jumped his mech knee deep into the waters. A large bout of steam escaped from the lower surface of the mech as the persistent heat it built up started to dissipate into the cold, rushing water.

The Carabiniers caught up again and started to fire at the Crystal Lord. Due to being in the water, its mobility had become affected, leading to serious damage. Some of the internals even started to get exposed!

That was when the Crystal Lord unleashed two laser beams at once. It bracketed the Carabinier with the damaged leg from two directions. Though the mech dodged away from an incoming beam, it did not expect the other beam released from the Crystal Lord's chest. It got hit in the leg!

"Yes!"

Barras quickly adjusted the aim of his rifle and managed to compound upon the damage to the leg of the faltering mech. Its momentary slowdown proved fatal as the laser beams finally burned past the thin leg armor and wrecked the internals.

The Carabinier mech collapsed onto its knees.

Barras had no time to finish it off. It kept wading through the waters, moving away from the immobilized mech while the other two Carabiniers focused on taking down their persistent prey.

"Hahahaha!" Barras laughed as he saw the chest crystal getting charged up again. Though its capacity wasn't very great, it fired off many times more than the crystal of a gold label mech.

Again, Barras repeated the same trick that snagged another Carabinier. This time, he hit the mech in the chest, which didn't amount to a lot of damage.

"Damn!"

It took a couple of successive hits to finally penetrate its chest armor. At this point, the Carabinier who piloted the mech fell back. It had no choice but to do so, because one more hit would have disabled or destroyed the mech.

"Now, there is only one."

The only problem for Barras was that his laser rifle's last battery pack was spent. "Tch! If only they didn't destroy my backpack module!"

The Crystal Lord kept all of its spare battery packs in its backpack module. That worked fine most of the time, but in a running engagement like this, it had been one of the first things to be destroyed.

"I can only put my faith on this crystal."

After making a decision, Barras resolutely turned around his Crystal Lord and charged the remaining Carabinier. The Vesian mech had seen two of its fellow mechs falter in succession against this supremely tenacious mech, and its mech pilot was starting to feel the pressure.

Laser beams raked the Crystal Lord in a chaotic manner. Only some of it hit the exposed internals, while the rest splashed against the mostly-intact sections of armor.

A significant amount of energy channeled into the chest crystal as the laser beams kept comping. Once it had reached saturation, it unleashed a tight but potent laser beam that Barras aimed straight at the enemy's laser rifle.

The weapon got hit, and promptly malfunctioned. Both sides lost their primary weapons and resorted to their backup knives. The Carabinier started to back

away, but the Crystal Lord wouldn't have any of it. Barras was fully engaged in the fight and wanted nothing more than to dish some hurt onto his pursuers.

A brief but brutal exchange took place. The Carabinier mech was of worse quality than the Crystal Lord. Its uncompressed armor allowed the Crystal Lord's weak knife stabs to enter after a couple of sustained stabs.

Barras screamed as the Crystal Lord's knife slipped through the cockpit of the enemy mech. The Carabinier mech futilely tried to stab its knife through the exposed weak points of its adversary, but Barras constantly kept his mech moving to avoid getting pinned down in such a manner.

Eventually, the Crystal Lord hadn't let him down. The mech stood over the fallen Vesian mech, worn and almost out of fuel. Barras laughed ruefully at himself as he looked at this situation.

"This is both the best and worst purchase I have ever made."

#### **Chapter 439 Georgia**

Georgia Lyall turned to the main recorder of the news program. "In our next segment, let us talk about the latest mech model that has upended the upper segment of the rifleman mech market."

"Are you talking about the Gizlin Mark IV?" A fat pundit who proudly referred to himself as Osmon the Mech Sage probed.

Another pundit on the panel shook his head. "That's the wrong price segment. We're not talking about that cheap piece of trash that falls whenever it encounters a breeze!"

"Professor Marklen is right." Georgia nodded. "The mech model I'm referring to is the iconic-looking Crystal Lord!"

A projection of its design and some key specs started to appear from the table in the middle of the studio.

"Designed by Ves Larkinson, this premium rifleman mech model comes in three different variants, and are mainly distinguished by quality. The so-called gold and silver label mechs are produced by Mr. Larkinson's own Living Mech Corporation, while the more affordable bronze label mechs are left to various licensed manufacturers."

"I do have to say that the bronze label Crystal Lord is barely representative of this excellent design!" The Mech Sage interrupted in a brisk manner as he swigged a glass of beer. "I've seen all three labels in person, and the only mechs worth a damn are the ones produced by the LMC and no one else!"

"Ahem," Georgia tried to wave the Mech Sage down. "As I was saying, the Crystal Lord entered the market with a minor stir due to its extreme features, many of which has elicited a lot of arguments over the galactic net."

The news anchor proceeded to list the notable traits of the Crystal Lord, from its lightweight but resilient construction for a medium mech to the strange gimmicks incorporated in the chest and rifle of the mech. Lastly, she addressed the pricing of the mech.

"As of this moment, the gold label Crystal Lords are nearly impossible to obtain. As a variant that is prized for its exquisite quality and excellent performance in battle, the main reason why they are so hard to obtain is because it bears the privilege of being handmade by Mr. Larkinson."

"A Larkinson, you say?" The Mech Sage popped up again. "Any relations to 'those' Larkinsons?"

"Ves Larkinson is indeed related to the famous military family. In fact, his grandfather is none other than Benjamin Larkinson!"

"Splendid! No wonder his mechs are so fantastic! The Larkinsons know their mechs, that's for sure! Did I ever tell you how I made a bet with Ark Larkinson back when we were in boot camp? We bet on who could last out in the cold

out in the dark at night at our desolate training camp the longest! The winner would get all of the porridge the both of us received from the mess hall for a week. Did you know what happened?"

Georgia sighed inwardly, but she maintained her smile because she knew the mech nerds that watched her program lapped up these kinds of stories. The Mech Sage wouldn't have been a mainstay of her news portal otherwise.

"What happened?"

"The drill instructors immediately put a stop to our bet, but afterwards immediately kicked us out in the cold for the rest of the night! We shivered and shivered and hugged each other's bodies to keep ourselves warm! It was one the most miserable nights I've ever spent in my life!"

Imagining the famous Colonel Ark Larkinson as a scruffy young mech pilot spending the night out in the cold with nothing but another buddy for warmth must have sent the audience cracking. Georgia possessed a thin implant over her eyes that indicated that her audience indeed reacted positively to the anecdote.

Sometimes, she wondered why she ever agreed to host a broadcast program about mechs.

Still, lots of people watched those shows, and the pay was good, so Georgia maintained her smile and pressed on. "That's interesting to hear, but let us get back to the Crystal Lord. Initially, the models entered the market with a whisper. The specs looked attractive, but the pricing scared many people away. The initial sales came from those who attended the product reveal. All of them we've interviewed were ecstatic about the Crystal Lord models."

"Who can blame them?" Professor Marklen interjected this time. "This dangerous line of mechs possess a powerful capacity to manipulate the judgement of any person that comes near one of these dangerous mechs."

They are an abomination and should have never passed validation! I don't know what the MTA is doing these days, but whoever validated this monstrosity of a design should be executed for treason!"

Georgia knew she had to intervene. "Now now, professor, let us not cast any blame upon the MTA here. The fine folks that keep human space in check are nothing if not thorough."

Marklen obviously disagreed, but he received a quiet signal that he should firmly shut up about this topic. He had no choice but to comply.

Professor Marklen was another regular guest to the program, though he didn't appear as much as the Mech Sage. He was a bona fide mech designer, but was merely an assistant professor to a small institution on Bentheim. His main value in the program lay in the fact that despite holding the title of professor, he possessed a lot of eccentric thoughts.

"I still think the LMC has the ethical duty to pull the Crystal Lord from the market." Marklen persisted, this time making sure he didn't involve the MTA in his argument. "While by all accounts the neural interface is a bog-standard reproduction of a standard model that is prevalent in many designs in the Republic, we can still constitute that everyone who has ever piloted a Crystal Lord or came into viewing distance of it became strangely affected."

The Mech Sage slammed his meaty palm against the table top while letting out a burp. "Maybe they just appreciate a good mech! With so many crappy designs being published these days, the young Larkinson's latest work is a breath of fresh air."

Georgia nodded, seemingly in agreement. "There are even rumors percolating over the galactic net that the Crystal Lord design is even eligible to be nominated for the Best Mech Design of the Year in the Junior category. What do you say about this possibility?"

"It's outrageous!" Marklen screeched. "Safety studies have barely started on the Crystal Lord, and already the mech industry wants to elevate it onto a pedestal? That is highly irresponsible! There are too many oddities with this mech, from the alien-derived crystal technology to the way it assimilates everyone it gets in touch with. I want to reiterate that I want to see this design banned!"

The Mech Sage laughed again. "Hahahaha! That's the funniest thing I've heard in a week. There's no way the Crystal Lord will be taken off the market. You'll have half the market rising up in protest. For better or worse, the Crystal Lord is peaking in popularity. Everyone wants a piece of it, and the mech manufacturers aren't pumping them out fast enough."

"Why has the Crystal Lord become such a remarkable success despite its tepid introduction? If you take away the magnetism of the mech and look at the numbers on the spec sheet, the mech provides poor value for money."

"Ah, that is what everybody thought, but they were wrong." The Mech Sage wagged his fat finger. "Some of the features of the Crystal Lord don't sound very impressive on their own, but taken together, they are actually able to reinforce each other. For example, cladding a fast mech with a thin layer of compressed armor normally doesn't do too much, but the Crystal Lord is really, really fast."

"Does that make any difference?"

"It makes a huge difference! The faster you move, the more damage you can spread out over your entire frame! The speed of the Crystal Lord is really unreal for a medium mech. It's almost like a light mech in a sense. Though its agility is a little worse, it's fast enough to prevent any ranged mechs from focusing their fire on a single component of the Crystal Lord. That massively improves its survivability on the battlefield."

Professor Marklen did not agree, or rather he was not willing to let the Crystal Lord become more attractive in the eyes of the audience. "All of that sounds great, but you are overlooking two important factors. All of that running around will wear out the Crystal Lord. For a design that is prized for its endurance and longevity, its parts can't keep up with extensive use. Already we are hearing stories about some parts fallen off the Crystal Lord after surviving a stressful engagement."

"That's only the case with the bronze label variants! None of the silver and gold label Crystal Lords have reported any excessive wear and tear!"

"Not yet, but the designs for the three labels are functionally the same, barring a few exceptions. It's impossible for this problem to be absent in the more expensive versions of the Crystal Lord. As I was saying, the problem of accelerated wear and tear is compounded by the fact that this mech is really expensive to maintain. Much of the value from this design comes from its premium materials. Repairs on the field are impossible to perform because the components of the Crystal Lord require a whole laundry list of raw materials to reproduce."

This was a problem that some ecstatic owners of the Crystal Lord had just begun to encounter. From the Trailblazer engine to the crystals, from the Veltrex armor system to the HRF armor system, Larkinson's design utilized too many different raw materials in its construction.

Mech technicians already started to hate the design for being so difficult to repair in the field.

"You know, back when I was making a name for myself in the previous war, a lot of repairs are improvised patchworks. Even the mechs that are designed in-house can't be restored to their original condition on any battlefield environment. The mech designers leading over the mech technicians have

always made do with whatever they could get their hands on. Sometimes, to patch a hole in the armor, they even resorted to plain steel!"

"That does not disprove my original point." The professor persisted. "Even in times of momentary peace, it's a strain on logistics to supply all the raw materials to fabricate replacements parts. That reminds me, the second reason why the Crystal Lord is a burden to any outfit is the fact that its much-praised Trailblazer engine only accepts medium-density mech-grade fuel."

"It's a fuel-efficient engine design from the Friday Coalition!"

"Just because it comes from the Friday Coalition doesn't mean it deserves an automatic seal of approval. The Trailblazer engine is not an engine design that has been formed by one of the Coalition's famous equipment designers or manufacturers. It has instead come from the hand of a single mech designer. It is inevitable that his biases have affected his design. The Trailblazer engine might be efficient if used in the Coalition, but here in the Bright Republic medium-density fuel is getting harder and harder to obtain."

"The refineries are still up and running." The Mech Sage sullenly said.

"For how long? Fuel refineries are the number two or three highest priority targets that the Mech Legion always aims to destroy. If past trends holds true to the present, then we can expect the price of medium-density fuel to double or triple in the middle phase of the war."

That was something that the Crystal Lord design couldn't do anything about. Every customer that bought the Crystal Lord for long-term value would eventually start to wince when they received their fuel bills."

"Is this enough to take the Crystal Lord out of contention for Best Mech Design of the Year?" Georgia asked, spotting an opportunity to get back on the foreground of the discussion.

"This isn't a possibility. It's an ironclad fact." Marklen confidently spoke. "The Crystal Lord may be enjoying its time in the spotlight right now, but sooner or later the public will shake away the brainwashing and wise up to the truth!"

Georgia smiled as she received another bit of news from the producer. "Well, I'm afraid you'll have to be disappointed, because word has just come in. The Bentheim Mech Court has just announced their shortlist of nominations for the Junior category of Best Mech Design of the Year, and Mr. Larkinson's Crystal Lord is in the list!"

A groundswell of astonishment spread throughout the audience that watched the program. Other news portals and mech portals quickly released the same news, confirming the rumors that the Crystal Lord was in contention to receive a prestigious reward!

#### **Chapter 440 Built To Raid**

The true worth of a mech designer lay not in their skills or experience, but in the quality of their designs.

One did not necessarily lead to the other.

Even if a mech designer possessed a genius-level intelligence and enjoyed extensive tutoring from renowned Masters, his products might still end up lackluster and without inspiration.

This often happened in high-pressure learning environments in the galactic center and the galactic rim. Their abundant wealth and population enabled many hopefuls to study mech design. Yet once they entered the ultra-competitive mech markets there, they instantly got swamped.

They learned in the most brutal fashion that to be a successful mech designer, they needed to be more than technically adept. They needed to have a sense of art and craftsmanship.

"Mech design is both a science and an art. Among two functionally similar designs, the one which resonates more with the people will always have an edge."

Artistic sense could be trained, but only up to a certain point. It was something which could never be defined or measured in hard numbers. What one person found beautiful, another person might think of it as trash.

The key to mech design was to design a mech that appealed to a broad audience. If that couldn't be done, then it should at least be attractive to its target audience.

To be nominated to win the award for Best Mech Design of the Year, a design had to possess more than technical prowess, though that was also indispensable.

The Crystal Lord design happened to be strong at both. The product line exhibited pretty good specs and possessed a clean and mostly faultless design.

However, the main qualities that pushed it into contention to win an award was its inexplicable effect at impacting both bystanders and mech pilots alike. The mech possessed a weight to it that could hardly be seen in other mechs besides those that possessed a very special history.

Many mech designers who witnessed the copies in person and mech pilots who tried out the virtual copies in online games all puzzled over what made the Crystal Lord so special. When they compared the Crystal Lord to the Blackbeak, they noticed the same qualities, but at a weaker level.

Clearly, the Crystal Lord was not a fluke, and its compelling allure must have been a deliberate design feature. As mech designers and mech pilots puzzled over the mystery, word of mouth spread far and wide, and even foreign markets showed interest in importing the remarkable mechs.

All of this had made the powerful and influential Bentheim Mech Court take note. Besides presiding over difficult disputes and contentions in the mech industry, they also recognized the works of brilliant mech designers who resided in the Bright Republic.

That the Crystal Lord had been acknowledged by the Court was already an enormous honor. Though it only fell into contention in the lowest grade of its awards, demand had already spiked once the news leaked out.

All of this thrust the LMC into a spotlight, but sadly the mech designer who shaped the remarkable design was many light-years away from the spotlight. While his company accepted more and more accolades, Ves was cooped up in his newly-assigned office to prepare to take up his new duties.

Despite having cut off his connections to the mech industry back, Ves found it rather strange that his achievements directly led to a promotion in the hollowed-out design department of the 6th Flagrant Vandals.

He blinked and rubbed his eyes as he took a break from his reading. "The Crystal Lord must be selling like hotcakes right now if word of it had managed to reach the Vandals."

Though Ves still felt a little bewildered about it since his accomplishments back home shouldn't have affected him like this, he decided to roll with the punches.

In preparation for the new tasks Professor Velten expected him to complete, Ves needed to get up to date with various protocols and technical data. The extra reading imposed on him didn't help so much because much of the true secrets of the three actively developed designs of the Flagrant Vandals remained enclosed inside impenetrable black boxes.

Though it annoyed him to be deprived of how certain key components worked, he slowly realized that it wasn't just a matter of secrecy. The professor also

wanted to preserve his sanity. Spending the last couple of days trying to digest the new information already strained his mind somewhat, though his mental fortitude was a lot stronger than anyone realized.

"The so-called higher concepts don't seem so nebulous now that I think about it." He muttered. "The main reason why they are so dangerous is because they can potentially ruin someone's design philosophy."

From the brief instructions the professor had given him, Ves needed to be very prudent with what he read. Ves remembered what she said back then.

"The process of learning is one of the strengths of a civilized race. Each generation, the human race advances a little more because they learned from the mistakes of their predecessors. Yet we spend so much of our lifetime learning from others that we risk losing the ability to think for ourselves. There are lots of dangers involved with indiscriminate learning. Besides learning faulty information, you also risk narrowing your perspective on matters. Once this transfers to your developing design philosophy, you essentially become prematurely locked to someone else's stance on mechs."

Basically, Velten wanted Ves to study up so he could be of more use, but not go too far with his learning unless he wanted to destroy his ability to cope with the unknown and design mechs that could truly be called as his own work.

Ves knew she had a point, and as much as Ves wanted to dismiss the risks, he couldn't. Though he wouldn't get confused by the higher concepts, the danger to design philosophy and artistic vision remained as potent as ever. The more he learned, the more he agreed with the solutions of the original designers, and the less he tried to figure out alternative solutions.

Designing mechs eventually needed a hands-on approach. The more successful mech designers never reached their heights by relying on learning

alone. They also applied their knowledge and tested the boundaries between what they knew and didn't know if it would be possible.

Thus, as much as Ves wanted to delve into the depths of the archives, he forced himself to pull away.

"I know enough about the three designs to get the gist of them all."

He mainly read up on the other two designs developed in-house by the Vandals. Both the Inheritor light skirmisher and the Akkara heavy cannoner served vital purposes that underpinned many of the strategies employed by the Vandals. Ves needed to become as familiar to their nuances as he understood the Hellcat hybrid knight.

The Vandals heavily slanted towards spaceborn operations.

It was obvious that they designed the spaceborn Inheritor design to be fielded in large numbers. The mech excelled at raiding fleeing trade convoys, but was pretty much useless in many other situations.

The spaceborn Hellcat design served as the big brother of the Inheritor mechs. Larger, more powerful and exceedingly more expensive, the Vandals only needed a couple of them to stiffen up a company of Inheritor mechs.

As for the dual-purpose Akkara design, it provided the Vandals with a heavy amount of ranged firepower, albeit in an immobile package. By sacrificing mobility, it was able to field a lot more firepower and armor than usual.

The Akkara basically served as the semi-mobile defense turrets of the Vandals, and was a very interesting design to Ves. Its unabashed simplicity should have made it an easy mech to design, but the truth was actually opposite as the design team responsible for its continuous development often slipped up due to the sheer amount of systems packed into the design.

"The Vandals aren't too interested in fielding ranged mechs."

Ves got the sense that the Vandals treated the Akkara as a necessity. All-melee mech regiments were particularly vulnerable to being kited to death by faster ranged mechs.

Almost every mech regiment of the Mech Corps developed their own spin on rifleman mechs. Not the Vandals. They cared so little about ranged warfare that they would rather resort to Vesian mechs stolen from their targets during their raids.

From his additional reading, Ves learned the reason why. The Vandals found excessive amounts of ranged weapons to be very destructive. This was good if they wanted to obliterate their opponents, but often times they wanted to preserve as much as they could in order to derive some value out of their spoils of war.

"Melee mechs can control their damage output much more precisely than their ranged counterparts."

He didn't forget about the fact that rifleman mechs caused the most amount of collateral damage out of all the different types. This was especially egregious in battles in space. An attack on a transport risked damaging its structural integrity. If the ship suffered too many attacks, it might break apart, spilling its cargo and often also ruined it all.

In that sense, almost every aspect of the Vandals was deliberately geared for raiding and raiding alone. Nothing about their mech usage suggested that they showed any interest in fighting pitched or defensive battles. They basically looked for the best way to bully a weaker adversary.

Before he went and liaised with the mech pilots about the Wolf Mother, Ves met up with Laida and Pierce in order to pick their brains. They worked extensively with the two designs and he could benefit from hearing from a different perspective.

The two other mech designers from his batch hadn't achieved anything remarkable during their time in their design teams. Unlike Ves, they hadn't been able to draw any attention to themselves. Their skills and accomplishments were too average to elicit any interests from their superiors.

This turned them rather bummed as they witnessed the sudden promotion of Ves. This made them rather cranky when Ves went up to them to hear what they had to say.

"The Inheritor design is a death trap." Laida spoke with frustration. "It's a design that kills more mech pilots than any standard spaceborn skirmisher design from the central database. It doesn't perform all that well and its armor is as thin as a datapad in some areas. Such a mech should have been abandoned at the start."

Ves did not expect such an outpouring of negativity. "Why do the Vandals place so much importance in it, then?"

"The only redeeming factors of the Inheritor are its price, ease of fabrication and speed. The most important goal of the Inheritor design was that it had to be easy to reproduce in a variety of circumstances. It tries to incorporate as little exotics and possible, and when it does require some, it would always be the cheapest or most abundantly available exotics that they could steal from the Vesians."

"So the Inheritor design is weak because that's the price the Vandals pay for the ability to fabricate them anywhere?"

"Exactly. Its many weaknesses aren't well-kept secrets. Frankly, any mech pilot would feel appalled by the lack of the robustness in its design. Even for a light mech, the Inheritor goes through extreme lengths to make them fast but affordable."

"Have you experienced the same shenanigans at the Akkara design team, Pierce?" Ves asked the other mech designer after he was done listening to Laida.

"We aren't suffering from the same problems. Not a lot of mech pilots specialize in heavy mechs, so there will always be a shortage of heavy mech pilots."

"What about the design itself? Does it exhibit any weaknesses?"

Pierce took his time to answer the question. "It's a work in progress. Every day, something changes, and not always for the better. From what I've experienced, the Vandals really don't like this big lump of a mech. I think they're even neglecting the design in some cases."

As Ves heard about the two mechs from his colleagues, his impression of their actual state worsened.

Understaffed design teams and combined with a lack of appreciation for all the effort put into the designs sounded really bad to him. He couldn't do anything about the staffing, so instead he focused on changing everyone's impression about these mechs.