

Chapter 451 Code of Conduc

His brief blunder with Iris aside, the rest of the installation proceeded without issue. Once the cockpit's interior became whole again, they invited the mech pilot assigned to this Inheritor to test it out.

"Will anything really change?" Chief Carmon asked with a healthy dose of skepticism.

"I know it doesn't seem very impactful, but it's been proved that the surroundings of a mech pilot can drastically influence the way he pilots his mech. A pilot who is uncomfortable in his own mech will only be able to exert eighty percent of his full potential."

Ves quoted an old study that actually tested this premise out. Put a mech pilot in a rotting old rusted cockpit, and his performance fell off a cliff.

Nevertheless, adding excessive comforts in the cockpit risked a backfire as mech pilots tended to become more complacent while they piloted. They lost their edge and became less alert.

After decades of experimentation, the mech industry came to a consensus that the best cockpit was a clean and sterile environment. Any comfort provided to the pilot should be understated and invisible. It should facilitate the mech pilot for long stretches of time without inducing too much physical discomfort. It should also be uncomfortable enough to keep the mech pilots on his toes.

All of this sounded simple at first glance, but in practice it was very hard to apply. Every mech designer held their own ideas on how far they needed to go in terms of inducing comfort and tension.

Ves had always leaned towards the camp that stated that the best way to go was to go with comfort. It fit well with the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord

designs, as they had both been designed to operate for long stretches of time. The X-Factor was also strongly associated with comfort, though not everyone bought this line of thinking.

Many mech designers found excessive attention to this area to be a massive waste of time. Ves remembered his last visit to Leemar, where he got entangled in a design duel with Oleg. Master Olson's genius disciple strongly believed that designing a stronger mech mattered the most.

"Would you rather sit in a comfy chair as your mech falls short and explodes, or sit in a neutral chair and ride your mech to victory?"

In any case, Chief Carmon and Lieutenant Chandis shared the same skepticism as they watched the mech pilot clamber into the completely renewed cockpit.

"Everything is shifted!" The mech pilot broadcasted from the cockpit. "Give me a couple of minutes! I have to relearn where everything is positioned!"

They waited and waited until the Inheritor finally booted up. The slim mech came to life and started to stretch its hands and fingers.

"How is it going so far?" Ves asked while he glanced at the control panel that showed the Inheritor's parameters. Everything looked green so far. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Okay? This is more than okay! I feel great!"

The mech pilot displayed the usual exuberance of someone who got dosed in the X-Factor for the first time of their life. Ves was highly familiar to such reactions, so as soon as he heard the jubilation in the voice, he knew he succeeded.

The mech he worked on radiated a faint pressure. It was very weak, and were it not for his highly tuned senses and his knowledge on what to look out for,

Ves wouldn't have been able to spot it. He was afraid that his work on the cockpit was too inconsequential to count, but evidently his fears could be put to rest.

Back at the professor's office, Ves and Iris waited in their seats as Velten finished parsing the readings.

"I see that your test pilot has performed up to twenty-eight percent better than usual at the start, but diminished as the simulated combat tests dragged on. How can you prove it's not the placebo effect at work?"

Professor Velten doubted the effectiveness of his changes. She insinuated that the only reason the mech pilot delivered a better performance than the norm was because he was motivated to do so and he mistakenly believed the rearranged cockpit would measurably improve his piloting ability.

Many times, the performance of a mech pilot hinged on his beliefs. If he believed a battle could be won, his morale would be high. If he believed he was being sent into a hopeless battle, his morale would be rock-bottom and he would be constantly be thinking about escaping rather than winning the battle.

If Ves had access to more mechs, he could have setup a rigorous experiment to prove that it wasn't just a delusion at work. Unfortunately, he was only allowed to work on a single mech, so he couldn't provide any hard data to prove otherwise.

He instead turned to another argument he prepared beforehand. "I can't rule out the influence of the placebo effect, but suppose that this may be true, what does it matter? Any chance we can increase the performance of the mech pilots of the Inheritor is one we should grasp. Even if the mech pilots find out the truth and the placebo effect loses its strength, we've already reaped the

benefits by then. Truth or false, the twenty-eight percent performance boost is very real."

Velten looked very severe at Ves. "You are playing a dangerous game here. You are playing with the fundamental trust that mech pilots have bestowed on mech designers such as you and me. They entrust us with the design of their war steeds. What you have just suggested is a violation of the responsibilities we hold as mech designers."

The accusation bit deep into Ves. The professor wasn't wrong. Ves essentially tried to pass off snake oil as medicine to their gullible mech pilots. Once they found out the truth, every mech designer aboard the Wolf Mother would suffer a collective loss of trust and intimacy.

"The consequences are heavy, but what's a little scorn compared to a failed operation and the defeat and dissolution of the 6th Flagrant Vandals? We need to pull out all the stops for the upcoming system assault. In my opinion, we shouldn't be afraid of resorting to short-term gains that come with a price. As long as we delay the payment, anything is justified."

If his ethics professor back at the Rittersberg University of Technology could hear his words, the old man would smack his face until his cheeks turned red.

Professor Velten shook in her seat, and it seemed as if she contemplated doing the same, despite the risk of breaking her fragile hands. A few seconds later, she subsided for some reason.

"Do you know that the MTA routinely investigate egregious violations to the code of conduct of mech designers? You do not have to break the law to run afoul of their Compliance Department."

Mentioning the Compliance Department sent a chill through the backs of Ves and Iris. The relatively boring administrative name belied the enormous amount of power they wielded over human space. They enforced the rules set

by the MTA and more famously cracked down on any organization that violated the fundamental taboos set at the start of the Age of Mechs.

One of those taboos happened to be a prohibition on the development and propagation of weapons of mass destruction, something which Ves had deliberately stepped upon a while ago. If the MTA ever found out that he worked on a gamma laser rifle, the Compliance Department would hunt for him to the ends of the galaxy.

In short, Ves did not wish to be investigated by the Compliance Department.

Yet on the matter of the cockpit, Ves believed that the MTA had better things to do. They wouldn't move out their Compliance Department over a small violation of ethics.

"The ends justify the means, especially since the means don't come with a heavy price." He retorted calmly. "Trust can be regained and bridges can be rebuilt, but the dead can never be brought back to life. What's the harm of telling a couple of white lies?"

This argument weakened the Senior's resolve, but it hadn't been able to tear down her adherence to the rules. "Beneficial or not, it is wrong to deceive the mech pilots. I won't accept any deception in my department."

This old hag! Ves wanted to curse this stubborn Senior, but held his emotions in check. He absolutely couldn't afford to reveal his true emotions. His face slipped into an impassive expression as he extended another argument.

"Ma'am, too much is at stake for you to make this decision on your own. Compared to a short-term performance boost of up to thirty percent, it's a lot better than any other proposal. Why not take it up to Colonel Lowenfield and let her decide? As the commander of this regiment, she should have the ultimate say on what is best for our mech pilots."

This seemed to resonate with Professor Velten. She mentioned the code of conduct to illustrate why he shouldn't propose his plans, so Ves threw it back in her face.

The code of conduct stated that mech designers who worked on behalf of a client should be responsive to their demands. Mech designers also needed to be open and transparent about their work, and be ready to flip their designs in a completely new direction if their clients demanded any major shifts.

Ves basically maneuvered the professor into kicking the issue upstairs. If Velten refused to bring the issue up to Colonel Lowenfield, then she would prove that she was a hypocrite who didn't live by the rules she espoused.

Eventually, the professor came to a decision. "Wait a moment."

A screen that shielded most sounds and transmissions from leaking out sprang up around the professor. Ves patiently waited as Velten rang up the colonel and presumably discussed his proposal.

Several minutes later, the screen disappeared and Velten came back into clear view. Her wrinkled lips pursed with discontent. "The colonel, in her eminent wisdom, has decided that the stakes are too high. She has weighed the extra work your proposal demands and the downsides to lying to our own mech pilots against the benefits that it might bring."

And? Ves wanted to ask, but he kept his eagerness from bursting out his words.

"She approved your proposal. In fact, she gave us broad discretion on how to reschedule the planning so that we can deliver the finished mechs to the mech pilots at the right time. Too soon, and the placebo effect will wear off before we launch the assault. Too late, and the mech pilots won't be accustomed to the buckethead interface and the other changes."

Ves and Iris grinned. Were it not for sitting in front of a Senior, they would have whooped and cheered.

The most important thing was that Ves finally got something solid past the professor's walls. Sure, he might have pissed her off, but he didn't take it too hard. His goals were pure.

The professor spoke again. "You shall be held responsible for coming up with this proposal and implementing it to as many Inheritors as possible. Work with the planners at logistics to get this done. I don't want my hands to be stained with this project."

"Will do, professor." Ves bowed his head in thankfulness.

Though he hadn't expected to be held responsible for the broad implementation of his design changes, it was an unexpected boost for him. For as long as Ves stayed aboard the Wolf Mother, he had never gotten exposed to any other major assets of the Vandals. He didn't know how many ships they owned and how many mechs they could field.

He could finally fill in some of the gaps in his knowledge if he was given the right access. Anyone else might think this job was a bother, but Ves saw it as a prime opportunity to learn more about the Vandals.

Chapter 452 Hidden Strength

"How did you know that punting the decision to Colonel Lowenfield would work?" Iris curiously asked Ves after they stepped out of the professor's office.

"It's simple. As much as we should respect Professor Velten's accomplishments, you have to realize that she's a single cog in the machine that keeps the Flagrant Vandals running. An important cog, but still a tool nonetheless. Her priorities are derived from orders from above, so we shouldn't expect any flexibility from her. To get an exception, we have to reach the ultimate authority who issued those orders."

From what Ves had gathered about Colonel Lowenfield, she did whatever it took to achieve her goals. That was not to say that she was ruthless, but she recognized she needed to bend the rules sometimes in order to keep the Flagrant Vandals afloat through these difficult times.

"I see. That's very smart of you, Ves, though I won't imagine the professor being pleased with what you pulled off. You did disregard her words in front of her face."

"She's not the one in charge around here. The stakes are too high to follow the normal process. Only by reaching someone who has to take the entire situation into account is qualified to decide on our proposal."

He hadn't been wrong about the colonel. Despite never having met the figure, Ves heard more than enough stories to paint a basic picture about the commander of the Flagrant Vandals.

Rumor had it that she hadn't climbed the ranks of the Vandals. Instead, she used to lead another mech regiment before being banished to the Vandals after their previous commander 'mysteriously' disappeared.

Her posting should have been her downfall, but instead her competence and go-getter attitude revitalized the declining mech regiment. Naturally, most of the Vandals weren't aware that their existence ran on borrowed money, lots of it in fact.

Hence why this upcoming assault was all the more important. Its scale surpassed a casual raid, but did not reach the level of a full invasion. Their main goal was to steal everything of value and wreak havoc upon the industries of the Vesians, all the while taking into account that enemy reinforcements might arrive at any time.

Speed would therefore be essential to the assault. They couldn't afford the time to play it slow and safe. The Vandals needed to overwhelm the

defenders quickly, and that meant throwing lots of Inheritor mechs at enemy positions.

"Ves?"

"Yes, Iris?"

"What do you think about the Vesia Kingdom?"

Ves slowed his pace in the corridor. Why did she ask such a question to him? "I'd say they're our mortal enemies. No offense, Iris, but your state has tried to conquer the Republic over and over again. It's hard not to wish ill of the Kingdom."

"It's okay. I feel the same way." Iris responded with a gentle tone. She even slid closer to him and wrapped an arm around his back. "I hate the circumstances we live in. Everyone is brought up from birth to respect the nobles and to fight for their cause. We didn't even realize we were tools to the ruling class until we suffered in person."

"Your family even collaborated with the MTA, right? That should have been a great honor."

The Jupiter Family did well in the Kingdom, but ultimately they weren't part of a noble House. It only took one incident to tear down everything their lineage had built.

Iris shook her head. "The Vesian ruling class are predominantly mech pilots, did you know that? Competition between heirs is fierce, and often the one who has the bigger fist will win the battle for succession. People have a tendency to flock to potentates, but they don't realize that much of their lives revolve around training to fight. When every position of leadership in our state is occupied by a glory-hungry battle fiend, it's no surprise that they are constantly chafing to go to war with your Republic."

"And the norms who stepped over their potentate rivals tend to be schemers or strategists who can deal a lot more damage if they're in charge of a military force." Ves concurred. "Hardly anyone has inherited a duchy by advocating for peace and mutual respect."

Their culture differed too much from the Bright Republic. Despite being neighbors for hundreds of years, they simply held too many different opinions to live side-by-side in peace. The war between the two states would never end until one of them ceased to exist.

"So back to my question, do you hate the Kingdom?"

Ves had to gather his thoughts for a second. He always hated the Kingdom, but not to the extent of forming a personal vendetta against him. He mostly inherited his dislike for them from his parents and his fellow Brighters. The only time they personally affronted him was when they attempted to raid the Mech Nursery. Even then, he didn't blame them for doing so.

"Would the Komodo Star Sector be better off if the Vesia Kingdom is wiped off the map? Of that I have no doubt. I don't hate the people who make up your state. They're just poor chumps who have been brought up to believe in a flawed and outdated system of governance."

Iris smiled at him. "Thank you for keeping a clear mind. I'm glad you think that way about us. Not everyone in the Kingdom is hungry for slaughter."

They took up their new duties after that. Their new duties basically tasked them with coordinating with logistics and assisting them in establishing the most optimal schedule to overhaul the Inheritors to the modified design.

Ves needed to go to the core of the Wolf Mother for that. Usually highly guarded, the restricted area was where the heart of the Vandals rested. Ves only got a small glimpse of the clean interiors and rows and rows of

processors before he got ushered into the office of an officer in charge of logistics.

The next week passed by in a frantic pace. The entire the Vandal fleet began to move and use up some of their stockpile of materials to begin their major overhauls. The Inheritor was not the only design that led to a large-scale adjustment project. Modified designs for the Hellcat and Akkara mechs had gone through as well, forcing the Vandals to stretch their limited industrial capacity even further.

Logistics prioritized the overhaul of the Akkara and Hellcat models over the Inheritors. Ves could do nothing against this favoritism, but he did his best to prevent them from neglecting the Inheritor and to allocate every available bit of spare capacity to modifying the light mechs.

Ves yawned a bit as he sat behind a terminal in the logistics department. His job the last few days amounted to acting like a glorified babysitter. He was there to make sure that logistics did their job and didn't slack off for some reason or another.

"At least I have access to some of their more restricted information banks this time."

In order to do his job effectively, Ves required an overview of all the assets of the Flagrant Vandals.

This was the first time he got a broad top-level picture of the strength of the mech regiment.

So when Ves saw that the Flagrant Vandals actively fielded more than three-thousand mechs and mech pilots, his eyes almost popped out of their sockets!

"Three-thousand fieldable mechs!"

The Vandals also carried extra spare mechs, but the important point was that the Vandals possessed way more strength than was typical for a mech regiment.

Most ran with two-thousand mechs for a reason. For the Vandals to accomplished something like this without told him much about their raw ambitions!

Ves bet that a large reason why the Vandals went knee-deep into debt was because of this reckless expansion.

"Why do they need so many mechs? What are they hiding?"

Mech regiments possessed a large amount of authority. They picked their own mech models and organized their units according to their own customs. Some mech regiments fielded fewer than a thousand mechs, while others brought five hundred extra mechs along.

Yet Ves had never heard of a regiment from the Republic with over three-thousand working mechs. All of these mehs happened to be riding on a score of combat carriers and transports that must have cost a lot to obtain.

"A regiment doesn't expand its strength by fifty percent without a reason."

He tried to scour for additional details from his terminal's connection to the restricted database, but found nothing relevant that could answer his questions.

Strangely as it seemed, despite the database containing strong signs that a the Vandals fielded an extra thousand mechs, no one aboard the Wolf Mother except for the elites who worked in the restricted section knew about this. What this did mean?

Ves didn't know.

He truly didn't know.

After some hesitation, he walked up to the logistical officer and gently asked the fellow what was going on.

"Mr. Larkinson, I don't need to remind you that you should keep such information locked within your mind. The men outside this section do not need to know that our rolls are considerably larger than is publicly known."

"Understood, sir."

Not a lot of words passed between them. Ves read between the lines that his posting here was of some significance. Despite the boring and thankless nature of his current assignment, the true objective of his presence here seemed to be preparing him for something else. And for that, Ves needed to be aware of the true scale in which the Vandals worked.

At the end of the meeting, the officer left him with one final sentence. "The colonel is keeping an eye on you."

That caused Ves to subconsciously shiver. How did he attract the attention of such a legendary figure within the Vandals? His earlier word play against Professor Velten shouldn't have been significant enough to register on her radar.

As his mind filled with confusion, he eventually finished his shift and returned to the design department. He returned back in time to grab some freshly cooked dinner, so he eagerly grabbed a plate and sat down at the same table as Laida and Pierce.

"You're not hanging out with your girlfriend this time?" Pierce verbally jabbed at Ves.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're spending most of your time with Iris these days."

Ves coughed with embarrassment. "My relationship with her is purely professional. I've never given her an opening to sink her teeth into me. Alloc has already warned me not to entangle myself with the Vesian rebels."

Both of his fellow mech designers shook their heads.

"Don't you know how the two of you look when you work together side by side?" Laida spoke out. "The two of you are just like a married couple!"

Laida widened her eyes and shoved her palm over her mouth. "Sorry! I don't mean any disrespect!"

"Hey, I'm just an Apprentice Mech Designer, just like you. There's no need to apologise."

They awkwardly returned to their meals. As Ves ate some kind of pasta dish, he thought about his interactions with Iris so far. From his perspective, he had acted with perfect propriety throughout his interactions with Iris. The only problem was that the Vesian had a tendency to place her hand or arm around his body.

As much as Ves pretended to be unaffected, he had to admit her touch felt nice. Still, Ves always kept his rationality at the forefront and devoted as much of his attention to the business at hand. This should have been the right approach, but he did not factor in the opinions of others.

Even if he could say that he would never do something as stupid as defect to the Vesian rebels, his words would hold no strength. Laida and Pierce placed more faith on their own observations over any excuses that Ves could come up with.

Ves felt a little alienated by the tentative friends he made during his stay here. Before long, he would be completely separated from his fellow mech designers, just like what had happened during their training phase.

Chapter 453 Distant Connection

During his shifts at logistics, his expertise often needed to be employed to streamline the mass overhaul projects. If not for his understanding of what it took to perform each overhaul, the planners would have delivered an uneven mix of materials or allocated too many mech technicians to a particular project.

Despite this, the sheer scale of this undertaking meant that screwups happened plenty of times. Shuttles delivered batches of materials to the wrong logistics ship. A chief technician suffered an accident that left him indisposed. Mech pilots of two different squads got into a giant brawl over an argument on whose mechs should undergo an upgrade first.

These incidents revealed that not all was well with the Flagrant Vandals. As much as they showed a lot of outwards strength, internally the rot had already started to set in. Discipline was tight, but not as tight as a proper mech regiment of the Mech Corps.

As Ves spent more days among the wizards who tried to make sense of what went on within the vandals, he became jaded to the incidents. The strain over the last couple of years took a toll on everyone. He didn't take the annoyances to heart.

While every workshop aboard every ship worked to transform their Inheritors, Hellcats and Akkaras, the massive Vandal fleet continued to transition in and out of FTL.

Guided by their rebel allies, their approach had remained undetected so far. Observation ships and drones that should have detected their presence had long been co-opted by the local rebels who called the shots around these places.

Despite running through the territories of over half-a-dozen different rebel groups, so far none of them seemed to have ratted out their presence in the middle of Vesian territory.

Ves truly didn't know how the Vesian Revolutionary Front even managed to do so. So many people knew about the intrusion of the Vandals that it should have been impossible to keep a lid under the news, but nevertheless not a single ship of the Mech Legion arrived to confront the intruders.

Anticipation and eagerness started building up among the servicemen of the Vandals. They lived to raid, and the upcoming operation would be one of the most expansive attack since the foundation of their mech regiment.

To attack a prepared industrial star system was entirely different from raiding an underdeveloped system. With industry came wealth. With wealth came strength.

Even the least impressive industrial systems would be able to rally thousands of mechs in their defense. Naturally, only a fraction of them consisted of mechs from the Mech Legion and their local version of the Planetary Guard. Much of the mechs on these planets actually tended to be owned by gangs, mercenary corps and company forces.

Ves had witnessed their strength and behavior in the Glowing Planet campaign. When it came down to it, they always prioritized their own benefits. He envisioned that in the upcoming attacks, most of those outfits would stay put and defend their own stretches of land.

Even if their neighbor got attacked and overwhelmed by a group of Vandal mechs, as long as they didn't turn their rapacious hunger to them, these forces wouldn't lift a finger to help.

Thus, the effective amount of mechs arrayed against the Flagrant Vandals should be just a fraction of the star system's total strength.

The only problem was that a highly developed planet always supplemented their mechs with non-mech garrison troops. As long as the defenders threw enough infantry, tanks and aircraft at the Vandals, their assault would be heavily stymied.

However, this problem would not apply this time. According to the occasional loose lips that escaped from the mouths of the specialists at logistics, all of these regiments had in fact been infiltrated by the rebels to such an extent that they could instantly suppress the loyalists among their ranks and take effective control over their regiments.

Instead of being an asset to the star system's defense, they would instead aid its downfall. As a cherry on top, the rebels would prime this sequence of events by employing their off-planet assets. Ships and spaceborn mechs disguised as pirates would distract the system's defenders and stretch them out and defeat them in detail.

Ves did not hear much more of how the Vandals and the rebel movements would do the defenders in, but the audacity of their plans and the scale of their operation truly frightened him. Were it not for the signs that the Vandals and the VRF have possibly planned this move for years, Ves would have tried to weasel his way out.

"The Wolf Mother won't be staying too far away from the fighting."

This was an operation which required all hands on deck. Besides the hidden force of a thousand mechs, the entire public strength of the Flagrant Vandals would be put to use. The Vandals couldn't afford to hold back the Wolf Mother and the other logistical ships in a nearby abandoned star system. That would require supplementing their defense with escorts, which would take away too many mechs from the actual assault.

No. Colonel Lowenfield decreed that the logistical ships would travel behind but close to the main fleet. This would allow them to remain in the protective embrace of the main Vandal fleet while simultaneously also providing timely support services.

Of course, they also needed to be close to load up on all the loot the Vandals obtained from the industrial system.

No one expected the Wolf Mother to be threatened, but plans rarely went according to plan. Still, Ves was reasonably assured that she wouldn't be blown apart. The Vandals valued her too much to let her get scratched.

With a week or so to go until they arrived at their final destination, Ves reached the end of his shift and left the restricted area. As he walked back to the design department, an officer stepped in his way and barred his path forward.

Ves tried to shuffle to the side, but the man who stood in his way moved in the same direction. He started to frown and studied the officer. His shoulder pips designated him as a mech captain, one who led over an entire company of mechs.

"Please make way. I have to return to my assigned compartment."

"Mr. Larkinson, please wait a moment." The officer said. "My name is Captain Branser. On behalf of my men, I just want to express our gratitude to you. We've heard of your efforts to attract some attention to the Inheritors that some of my men are piloting. Ever since the mech technicians returned them to our hands, we've noticed the difference you've made."

"I, ah, that's good to hear." Ves blinked. "Captain, I'm just doing my job. I should be thankful to your men for their willingness to fight for the Republic."

Branser smiled in a cynical fashion. "For the Republic? Hah, as if. The Republic has done nothing to help us survive. It's only through the colonel's

efforts and your help that we'll be able to come back home with most of our lives intact."

Ves ought to feel indignant about his dismissal about the role the Republic played, but in the interests of tact, he let it slide. In fact, he eyed the captain in a different light. This was the first officer of the Vandals who approached him on his own accord and expressed his appreciation for his work.

Perhaps Ves could make use of this unexpected meeting.

"If you aren't busy, captain, would you like to have a drink with me?"

"Certainly!"

Both of them detoured to a nearby officer's lounge. The well-stocked bar offered an abundance of authentic liquors while the well-furnished interior gave the lounge a sense of class.

"So I heard you're a proper Larkinson. Is that true?"

"If you mean I'm related to the famous Larkinsons, then yes, I'm part of the Family. My father is veteran in fact."

"Oh? Which regiment did he serve in?"

As they sat next to a screen that displayed a simulated expanse of stars, Ves began to pump the captain for information. Of course, Ves didn't go about it in an obvious manner. He lulled the captain into complacency by talking about his youth with the Larkinsons and what he learned while studying mech design.

All the while, Ves poured more alcohol in both of their drinks, which they promptly swigged down at regular intervals. While the captain slowly began to get smashed, Ves retained all of his faculties. Possessing an extreme amount of Endurance sure came in handy at this time.

Once Ves judged that he sufficiently plied the unwitting captain with booze, he started sprinkling some of his actual questions in between their conversation.

"So, I've heard a bit about Colonel Lowenfield since the Mech Corps transferred me here. What's the deal with her?"

"The colonel?" Branser burped while his eyes curled into pleasure. "She sure turned everything around! Back then, we were really running on strings. The money ran out, supposedly. On paper, all of our mechs were in tip-top shape, but in truth half of them were in such an awful state that they'd malfunction as soon as they launched out of the hangar bays!"

"How did the arrival of the new colonel turn all of this around?"

"Beats me!"

"You don't know, captain?"

"Hey, my job is to pilot a mech. Logistics and finance isn't my strong suit. That's where Colonel Lowenfield comes in. She's a REMF."

As a Larkinson, Ves was more than aware of what the term REMF stood for. It was a highly impolite term for an officer who with a non-combat background. For example, the specialists and officers he worked with at the logistics department didn't have the strength to scare away a dog, but their work was vitally important in making sure that the Vandals who fought in the frontlines would have access to adequate mechs and supplies.

Still, it came to a huge surprise to Ves that Colonel Lowenfield was not a mech pilot and had never personally wielded a weapon into battle.

"I thought that every commander of a mech regiment is supposed to be experienced in battle." Ves responded with a puzzled tone of voice. "If they aren't mech pilots, then they ought to be former ones who are too injured to return to the cockpit."

Practically every armed force of the state in the galaxy was led by a current or former mech pilot. It was considered as a near-sacrosanct rule. Mech pilots only respected other mech pilots. Taking orders from a REMF was one of their worst nightmares.

History was littered with many incidents where the mech pilots of a mech regiment mutinied against their non-combat officers.

Captain Branser acknowledged his puzzlement, even as he downed another shot of liquor. "You'd think so, but you're wrong. The problem with us Vandals is that we got too many muscle-brained fighters and not enough of those clever types. Whoever the Mech Corps punts in our direction tends to be the stupider variants of those kinds of people. I swear the Mech Corps wants to make us all stupid!"

"If that's so, how did the colonel manage to end up in the Vandals?"

"Oh, it's all classified and stuff. Supposedly some foul business went on at Citadel Havensworth, and she somehow got banished to our corner of the Republic instead of being cashiered from the service. She even got a promotion to colonel out of it in order to shut her up and make her qualified to lead over the Vandals."

The mentioning of Citadel Havensworth pinged his memories. Ves began to have a bad feeling about this. "Do you happen to know who banished her from the Citadel?"

"Dunno. Can't remember. Well, maybe it's the base commander. Ah, I need another shot!"

His worst fear ended up to be true. Depending on the timing, his famous uncle Ark Larkinson may or may not have assumed the duty of base commander. Even if he hadn't been promoted yet, he would have still been close to that orbit.

The fateful decision to banish Colonel Lowenfield from a prize posting at the frontlines of this current war to the dumping ground of the Mech Corps must have certainly involved Uncle Ark.

Was this way the colonel kept her eye on him?

Chapter 454 Caught in the Web

Not everyone knew about Colonel Lowenfield's past, and those that did generally kept their mouths shut. Due to the eclectic backgrounds of the servicemen, the Flagrant Vandals developed something of a custom of not looking into anyone's past.

Ves hoped no one minded his attempt at digging into the colonel's backstory. He left Captain Branser to sober up with the help of a pill and left the lounge.

What he learned up to this point weighed increasingly heavy on his mind. The more time he spent with the Vandals, the more he learned they weren't so simple. The rest of the Mech Corps treated the Vandals with disdain, but this also allowed them to bend or break the rules with impunity.

Nominally, the 6th Flagrant Vandals Regiment answered to the 3rd Tarry Division. In practice, the 3rd Tarry exerted almost no measurable influence or control over their erstwhile subordinates. If they placed observers within the ranks of the Vandals, then they must have probably been bought or subverted somehow, because some of the things they did would never fly in the Republic.

"Collaborating with the Vesians, taking loans from unknown entities, exceeding the limits on fieldable mechs, this sure is a doozy."

Ves felt sure that this was just the tip of the iceberg. The Flagrant Vandals had been left to their own devices for so long that they had almost gone feral.

Nobody he met except for those transferred in recently held any belonging to the Republic. Perhaps even those who left family behind became increasingly

estranged to their former ties as the strict isolation left them to turn to their fellow servicemen for comradeship.

It seemed as if the only reason they hadn't cut ties with the Republic was because they wouldn't get access to the central database anymore. In every other area except research and development, they achieved tentative self-sufficiency.

"Oh, I can't forget about the debt as well."

He didn't know how reliable Alloc's statement of the Vandals being over 200 billion bright credits in the red. From what he had seen so far, the Journeyman might have lowballed the actual figure.

Keeping two-thousand mechs and mech pilots in fighting condition was hard enough. Adding an extra thousand on top of that would bankrupt any force trying to stay afloat by themselves.

There was a reason many private outfits tended to field a hundred mechs or less. The amount of overhead ramped up pretty hard as larger outfits needed to provide more services. Gathering so many mech pilots in a single place also tended to be difficult to manage, as without sufficient discipline, they had a habit of getting into ego-fueled duels and brawls.

The Flagrant Vandals could count on their professionalism to stem the tide of these phenomena, but only to an extent. Working in the restricted area provided him with plenty of signs that discipline had already begun to strain.

A mech regiment that resembled criminal gangs more than a proud unit of the Mech Corps could not expect its mech pilots to

That left Ves with the most pressing question on his mind.

"What is their endgame?"

Ves did not hold any delusions that the Flagrant Vandals fought out of duty, loyalty or patriotism. The Bright Republic was worth fart for these marginalized servicemen.

Colonel Lowenfield seemed to be steering them towards some other goal that he couldn't quite figure out yet. Whatever it was, she felt it necessary to expand their numbers by half. Given her background as a logistical officer, much of her plans would be well out of sight. People like her knew how to hide plenty of secrets in plain sight.

"The Vandals think that Lowenfield has rescued them from ruin. It's the opposite. She's leading them to eventual damnation."

The worst thing about it was that Ves had no means of conveying his suspicions to the Mech Corps or anyone else back home. If he had access to his personal comm and the System, he might have been able to covertly send a message to the right people, but without his toys, he possessed very little means to halt this dormant but threatening crisis.

"It's like boarding onto a passenger ship from orbit, only to find out that she is slowly descending into atmosphere and will eventually crash onto the surface of a planet. It's a one way trip, and all the escape pods are tightly guarded by the whole crew who are intent on riding this ship to her final destination."

If Ves threw all caution to the wind, he might be able to storm the communications center in the restricted area with the help of the Amastendira. The dematerialized weapon was his only hidden asset, and could deal an awesome amount of damage, enough to pull off a surprise attack, but only once.

He quickly discarded the idea of pulling off such a hairbrained gambit. The Vandals would surely kill him even if he got his message out.

He was like a fly who got entangled in the web of a spider. Colonel Lowenfield would never let anyone go, least of all Ves. His only choice was to wait for an opportunity.

The next couple of days, Ves continued to act as if he hadn't realized anything. He played the dutiful mech designer who occasionally assisted the planners in getting the right supplies to the right people.

The overhauled mechs took shape. With almost all of the mechs in the fleet configured anew, the anticipation building up inside everyone's heart had almost reached their bursting point.

The mech pilots of the Inheritors particularly enjoyed the rare enhancements, even if most of it turned out to be illusory. Ves personally paid a visit to the revamped mechs and found that though extremely weak, they at least held a shadow of a presence in the imaginary realm.

While it hardly made a difference, the Inheritor pilots celebrated even a minor increase in performance. How could they not, when they had been deprived for so long?

Still, many mech pilots were rearing up to go against the Vesians. Morale couldn't get any higher. They needed an outlet soon, or else this temporary increase in battle spirit would be wasted.

"What's it like for the Wolf Mother to enter into an active battlezone?" Ves asked Alloc one day during breakfast.

"That rarely happens, but this isn't a usual raid." Alloc grunted as he formed his thoughts. "It's nerve-wracking. Even if the chances of getting directly attacked are low, it still happened a couple of times in the past. Stealth technology being what it is, there are many ways the Vesians can circumvent our patrols and sneak up to the hull of our factory ship."

Ves knew how different stealth technologies worked when utilized by mechs, but he didn't have a good grasp on their effectiveness in spaceborn combat.

"Is it easy for an infiltrator ship to come close?"

It's easier to approach a small ship than a larger one. It depends on the scanners, really. The Wolf Mother possesses an excellent array of sensors, but most are geared towards detecting minerals. While they can still be repurposed to detect approaching infiltrators, most of them are constructed out of non-metallic composites. Together with other stealth technologies, and it becomes damn hard to spot any infiltrator trying to come up alongside our ship."

That explained the ease in which some of the last ships Ves had travelled upon had been boarded so easily.

"Is there a downside to this?"

"Just like with mechs, an exterior geared for stealth is paper thin. They don't make for very good armor, frankly. A single rifleman mech can blow them out of space within seconds. We've taken out more infiltrator ships than we can count. There's an easy method to counteract their approach if we make the right preparations."

The countermeasure turned out to be the spread of very fine microparticles. These little bits of metallic dust would constantly be fanned out from the Wolf Mother in an all-encompassing sphere. While the cloud of microparticles would rapidly dilute the further away from the Wolf Mother they traveled, within a certain range they remained highly effective in revealing the presence of anything material trying to approach the factory ship.

"That's surprisingly low-tech." Ves commented. "It's like throwing powder in the air and looking at them carefully as they float in the air. As soon as

something invisible bumps into them, they'll leave an discrepancy in the uniform cloud."

"As long as it works, it doesn't matter how simple the idea is. In truth, there's plenty of downsides to this method. First, we have to stockpile a lot of materials to keep pumping out these microparticles. Second, the effective range is very limited. Beyond a kilometer or more, the cloud is so diluted that we won't be able to track any approaches being made by smaller vessels such as stealthed boarding torpedoes."

More advanced states used more sophisticated means to detect the stealthy buggers, but those weren't anything the Vandals could get their hands on. They had to settle on the spaceship equivalent of throwing powder in the air.

At least Ves received some reassurance that trouble wouldn't likely come and knock at the Wolf Mother's door. As a factory ship, she could hardly take on a determined force of enemy mechs.

As the time of the operation became imminent, Professor Velten called every mech designer for a final briefing. Everyone filed into the conference room and took their seats. Ves and Iris automatically sat together at the far end of the room.

"Everyone is here. Good." The old lady nodded sternly. "Now, since the main fleet is at the cusp of beginning the operation, I am finally allowed to lift its curtain."

A projection shimmered in front of them. It depicted a fairly standard binary star system. One star consisted of a yellow dwarf while the other one was a much-weaker red dwarf. Both suns exhibited normal behavior for stars and orbited rather tightly around each other. Several planets orbited beyond both stars in roughly circular orbits.

"This is the Detemen System, a moderate industrial locus of the Imodris Duchy. It is ruled by two noble Houses, each of them occupying an inhabited planet each."

"Detemen II is smaller but closer to the twin suns. It's a hothouse that's barely habitable to humans, but is a hotbed to local industries due to their proximity to such a massive heat source. If you look at the artificial satellites around orbit, they all consist of highly automated solar forges. They present Detemen II with a fairly slow but highly efficient method of refining ores into usable materials. If more heat is required, they will make use of the starforge that occasionally orbits in between the twin stars."

One mech designer raised a hand. "How much ore is being processed at this planet?"

"A considerable amount, enough to supply the neighboring industrial planets with a portion of their material needs. The Detemen System sits at a strategic route that makes it a convenient stop for traders looking to refine their raw materials and decrease the amount of mass they are hauling from planet to planet."

"Ma'am, are there any valuable exotics being processed at Detemen II?"

"Sadly, no. The System is too unimportant and doesn't offer any facilities that are capable enough to work with highly reactive exotics." Professor Velten pointed at the projection and highlighted the starforge. "This is the only location in the system that holds a considerable amount of exotics. However, its proximity to the sun makes it very risky to relieve it of its booty. As of this point, we do not have any mech in our roster that can withstand the heat long enough to approach this satellite."

Ves stood up to ask his own question. "Professor, pardon my question, but what makes Detemen II valuable then? There doesn't appear to be much production going on at the surface of this heat-ridden planet."

"You raise a valid point." The professor switched the projection of the planet into a wireframe model. At one area on the surface, a large maze of tunnels stretched tens of kilometers underground. "This is the true jewel of Detemen II. When the Vesians terraformed the planet, they learned that it contains a trace amount of exotics. Under the heat of the twin suns and some special circumstances unique to Detemen II, they found out that these exotics are duplicating themselves from the regular soil of the planet."

That caused everyone to raise their eyebrows. What Velten referred to was basically a renewable exotics mine!

"I know what you are thinking. It's true. It is a low-grade exotics mine. However, it only produced a moderate amount of junk exotics each year, which is hardly anything to get excited over. Nevertheless, it produced enough wealth that Detemen II's stockpile should be of substantial value. This stockpile is our first primary target."

Chapter 455 Detemen System

"The first primary objective of the Flagrant Vandals is to raid the renewable mine's stockpile. It will be tightly defended, but if the Vesian rebels deliver on their promises, the actual amount of opposition we will face will be severely less than at their peak."

"Why are we going after a stockpile of junk exotics? Won't we gain much more out of this raid by attacking the industries on the surface?"

Velten shook her head. "While we would be able to obtain more valuable goods for their size and weight if we attack the individual refineries and manufacturing complexes on the surface of Detemen II, it will take far too

much time to overrun each company force and dig the loot out of their well-defended tunnels."

The projection shimmered again, this time revealing a loose schedule.

"According to our projections, once the Detemen System is attacked, enemy reinforcements will arrive in less than four days, depending on how much interference the rebels can throw up at their origin systems. Speed is of the essence here. With the time we'll waste on travelling in-system and other maneuvers, we don't have the time to care about the meager industries on Detemen II. Instead, we'll split up our fleet and send half of it to Detement IV."

"Detemen IV?"

"Yes, Detemen IV, ruled by a different noble House. Further away from the twin suns, the planet exhibits a much more moderate global climate. This has led to a boom in population and an increase in development. In practice, many of the materials being refined at Detemen II are being funneled towards Detemen IV for feeding the production of end products such as mechs and consumer goods."

Detemen IV was actually smaller than Detemen II, but nevertheless boasted a lot more inhabitants, though not to the extent of a trade nexus like Bentheim.

"As you can see, Detemen IV is nothing special. The only thing to note is its three small moons. Each of them are occupied by varying powers. One of which is the MTA, which will not be playing role in the coming conflict."

As an organization that acted beyond the interests of a single state, the MTA maintained a standpoint of absolute neutrality against any wars between states. Therefore, they gladly stood out of the way as long as nothing more than a stray projectile hit their assets.

"The other sun is turned into a fortress. I'll admit that its defenses are extremely formidable, to the extent of being able to repel a full mech division if

fully manned. The caveat here is the latter. There aren't enough men and mechs to fully staff this incredibly sturdy defensive bulwark. In fact, due to the war, the local nobles brought all of their most potent mech forces to the front, leaving behind a garrison of second-strong mechs and mech pilots."

Exacerbating their awful state was that the base commander of the lunar fortress resorted to staffing the undermanned fortress with auxiliary infantry and tank regiments. The same regiments that had been subverted by the rebels.

"Safe to say, this moon won't be a problem." Velten summed up before turning to the final moon. "The third moon is a mech research complex. It holds a small gathering of Vesian design teams that are developing a number of spaceborn mech designs. Due to its lack of secrecy, not a lot of valuable research is being performed at this research complex. Nevertheless, if we can overrun this base and steal any data banks that they haven't managed to wreck, we can glean lots of valuable intelligence that will help us determine the weaknesses of their current and future mech models."

Ves raised his hand again. "If the Vandals attack the research base, what will be done with the mech designers?"

Iris spoke out this time instead of the professor. "The Vesian Revolutionary Front and our partners will take them into custody as long as they surrender. We have... ways of making them work for us."

That didn't sound very pleasant, but at least it beat outright slaughter. Ves heard too many stories of vengeful Vesians massacring hundreds of mech designers whenever they sniffed out a Mech Corps research base. He had no doubt that the Mech Corps did the same in kind.

While Ves was no saint, as a mech designer himself, he didn't wish for his fellows on the opposite side of the war to be condemned to an early grave. He looked at Iris and smiled before he turned back to the professor.

"As much as these three moons look interesting, the main prizes are on the surface of Detemen IV. Similar to Bentheim, it is host to a moderate sprawl of manufacturing complexes and other industries. A substantial amount of mechs that is seen throughout the Imodris Duchy originate from these factories."

"Professor, won't we face the same dilemma as on Detemen II? All of the manufacturing complexes are tough nuts to crack."

"You would think so if you assume that both planets are run in the same fashion. In reality, they differ substantially."

A secondary projection popped up that detailed the noble Houses that ruled these two planets.

"Detemen II is ruled by Count Reizen of House Jier. This House is a young one and only control several rural planets and star systems around the Detemen System. Count Reizen is the head of the House, and Detemen II is the seat of their power. This causes the count to value this system highly. The main issue of the count is that it is a very unbearable planet to live on. In order to retain as many commoners as possible, he is treating them fairly well. The local rebel movements only have a weak grip on this planet."

That contrasted sharply with Detemen IV.

"On the other hand, Detemen IV has a lot more going for it. It boasts a temperate climate, a high level of development and at least ten times more inhabitants than the second planet from the binary stars. Nonetheless, it is spectacularly badly run by House Eneqqin."

The face of a sneering noble appeared next to House Eneqqin's sigil.

"Javier of House Eneqqin is the sole heir to the Count Loqer of House Eneqqin. Lacking any competition for the right to inherit Loqer's position, Lord Javier has turned into a spoiled brat, typical of the Vesians. Loqer thought to temper his only offspring by chucking him onto Detemen IV and making him responsible for running the somewhat prosperous planet."

Everyone could predict how that turned out. The Vesian nobles were all the same.

Professor Velten smirked. "Lord Javier has of course made a mess of the planet. Detemen IV's GDP has nosedived by twelve percent in the last five years, its cost of living has gone up and many workers are being laid off. This is a breeding ground for resentment and has bolstered the local rebel movement from an afterthought into a genuine threat. The spark has been lit. We only need to set it off."

She began to describe some of the broad strokes of what the Vandals had in store for Detemen IV. Once half of the Vandal fleet slipped into orbit over the planet, the rebels should have already launched their own attacks from space and on the ground.

With the lunar fortress and much of the other defenses loyal to House Eneqqin tied up or taken out of commission, the Vandals would act as the coup-de-grace and tip control of the planet away from Lord Javier's forces. Once that has happened, the rest of the planet would be free for the Vandals to pillage.

While it would still be troublesome to crack open the manufacturing complexes defended by company forces, much of those places had been infiltrated by the rebels as well. The Vandals would have a much easier time with breaking them open with some help from the inside.

Throughout it all, Ves kept wondering what the rebels got out of this death and destruction. He held no illusions that the Vandals would show mercy and be discriminate in their fire. He quietly turned to Iris and whispered his question.

"It's because they really want to get rid of Lord Javier." She whispered back.

"The heir is a recalcitrant tyrant, but the worst thing about it is that he's shrewd enough to stay within his limits. He never does anything too outrageous that causes Count Loker to call him back. He's also chummy with the industrialists who own property on Detemen IV. Though they aren't exactly happy with the worsening conditions of the planet, Javier's ties with them has caused them to stay put and do nothing."

This Javier fellow sounded like a real piece of work. "So the rebels agree for us to turn their entire planet into a living hell for a few days just to open up an opportunity to get rid of Lord Javier?"

"Oh, they don't want to get rid of him. They want to drag him out of the palace, bring him out in front of a crowd, and tear him apart from limb to limb. The amount of animosity they hold for him is very considerate. If it takes a foreign mech regiment to allow them the opportunity to get at Javier, then they'll gladly anticipate your arrival."

Lord Javier thought himself impregnable. Why wouldn't he? With his powerful daddy count covering his political hide, he had nothing to fear. The industrialists would be kept happy as long as he didn't make too much of a mess of things and while the rebels formed a nuisance, they could never defeat the forces at his disposal.

"Our goals here on Detemen IV is to identify the most promising sites and stockpiles to raid, and to assist the rebels in storming the palace in order to root out Lord Javier. Before you think that the latter is just a cursory priority, Colonel Lowenfield has promised the rebels that they will go above and beyond to capture the scion of House Eneqqin. Failure to apprehend him will

lead to a severe strain in our relationships with the VRF and other rebel movements."

After setting out the outline of the upcoming operation, Professor Velten finally turned to what their roles should be. "There are various areas where capable mech designers like you are needed. As I've mentioned before, the Vandal fleet will split in two. One detachment will attack Detemen II, while the other one will assault Detement IV."

Due to the unevenness of their strengths, one detachment would be larger than the other one.

"Since Detemen II is projected to be less of a challenge to overcome, the Wolf Mother will stick to the Vandal detachment that is responsible for raiding its renewable mine stockpile and its solar forges. The other Vandal detachment will go on to attack Detemen IV's moons and its surface industries."

The professor proceeded to allocate about a third of the mech designers in the conference room to the Detemen II detachment, including one Journeyman Mech Designer. Their jobs were comparatively easier, but they would still have plenty to do since they had fewer numbers.

Because the Wolf Mother stuck close to the Detemen II detachment, these lucky fellows didn't have to leave this ship. The same wouldn't be the case for the other mech designers.

When the professor allocated the rest of the mech designers to the Detemen IV detachment, Ves unfortunately fell within this category. He along with the rest who had been called up would have to leave the Wolf Mother and board one of the many combat carriers that ferried over mechs to assault Lord Javier's fief.

"Unlike the low-tier mech designers assigned to the maintenance departments, you will not have to follow behind the mechs as they deploy to

the surface. We can leave the task of helping with setting up forward bases that will facilitate in sending plundered loot back to the surface to their expert hands."

That left one worry off of their chests.

"Nevertheless, I expect that your expertise will be sorely needed when we take over the research base and when deciding which sites we should raid. The most of you will do your work from the safety of the command centers aboard the combat carriers."

Chapter 456 Stubby Growler

Ves followed after Alloc and stepped on board the shuttle. The Vandal fleet had finally arrived at the edge of the Detemen System. Throughout the haste of making the final deployments, Ves only caught a smattering of what went on.

Apparently, things somewhat went according to plan.

The rebels successfully struck the completely complacent defenders of Detemen II and Detemen IV. Supposedly loyal auxiliary regiments fell within moments as the traitors within their ranks completely turned against their clueless loyalist comrades. Those that remained took stock of the remaining weapons and began to sow an enormous amount of chaos.

Right now, the Detemen System hosted three different battle fronts.

First up was Detemen II, which the rebels hadn't been able to deal too much damage. House Jier held the second planet from the twin suns in a tight grip, and they never mistreated their inhabitants. This was why the rebels hadn't been able to deploy too many of their assets at this planet.

Detemen IV on the other hand fell into a different situation. The resentment against Lord Javier had reached a boiling point, thus a large portion of the local inhabitants rose up as well and rioted on the streets. This completely

disordered the planet and caused the defenders to button down in their bases and fight back against the traitor forces that took over the auxiliary regiments.

The third front consisted of the battle in space. A garrison fleet placed in the Detemen System by the Imodris Duchy normally handled all of the deep space patrols. Due to the relative security of the system as well as the pressing need for war assets at the front, the garrison had been left with a number of combat carriers and around three-hundred spaceborn mechs.

Still, defeating three-hundred mechs when they had the run of the entire system was extremely difficult. Keeping them alive and unharmed would be very detrimental for the Vandal fleets, as they would certainly nip at their heels and harass them from the flanks.

Thus, a plan had been set in motion to pull them into a trap. The rebels employed an elaborate distraction with many cheap carriers converted into supposed pirate ships.

The garrison fleet successfully took the bait and pursued the pirates. This drew them away from their bases and towards the edge of the system, right into the jaws of the Vandals.

By the time the garrison fleet realized that they had been duped, it was too late to redirect their momentum away from the Vandal fleet. It took too much time to change their course and shift their huge bulks back to the inner system.

"Strap yourself tight." Alloc said as he sat down on a crash seat and let the straps buckle him tight. "Even if battle is a couple of hours away, you might never know what the Vesians planted here."

"Understood, sir."

Ves sat next to Alloc and after bucking in, he looked at the handful of other servicemen that transferred out of the Wolf Mother. The Vandal fleet had

made a lot of reassignments, but it wasn't safe to send out a shuttle during FTL. They could only wait until they transitioned back into realspace before they could send out their transfers.

Now that they entered into a hostile star system, it was as if a switch had flipped in everyone's minds. The Vandals stopped messing around or display any signs of insubordination. They became highly focused and professional, just as Ves had imagined them to be before he arrived in their midst.

The shuttle lifted off from the shuttle hangar of the Wolf Mother and traversed a short distance towards one of the combat carriers heading towards Detemen IV.

"Ves."

He turned to Alloc. "Yes?"

"Your record states that you took part in the fight for the Glowing Planet. Is that true?"

"Pretty much. I was there from the start, and witnessed lots of fighting, sometimes up close. It's not something I'm eager to repeat."

"You've seen more action than me. Besides a couple of mech duels in an arena, I've never seen a real battle between mechs up close. I've always stayed aboard the ships looking at live or recorded footage."

"Recordings usually have very high fidelity, sir. There is no disadvantage in studying the way mechs fight through a projector."

"I used to believe that's the case, but after seeing you at work, I'm not so sure." Alloc sighed. "You're a conundrum, you know that? You're a decade younger than me, but sometimes you make me feel as if I'm the Apprentice and you are the Journeyman. It's not only your wealth of knowledge that astounds me, but also the amount of consideration you have for mech pilots

and their mechs. Your advocacy for the Inheritor mechs is like a gust of fresh air in our stale and stagnant design teams."

What was Ves supposed to say to that? "I appreciate your compliments, sir. It's not that hard to show a little more appreciation for the mechs we work with on a daily basis."

"It's not just your consideration that's notable compared to the rest of us. You have a strange way with mechs. It's as if everything you touch turns into something exotic."

"I like to think of it as bringing mechs to life." Ves boldly said on an impulse. Though it strayed a little close to the secret of the X-Factor, he had already become well-known for this saying due to the rising profile of the Living Mech Corporation. "My fundamental philosophy on mechs is that they are more than machines, and deserve to be treated as such."

Alloc fell silent for a moment. "Interesting. I never looked at mechs in that light. You look at mechs and see life. You draw up a design and see the potential of life. It's different for me. My main focus lies in programming the software of my designs, so I have always considered mechs to be blank slates. They start out as nothing, but as I fill in their programming, the details begin to fill in. Once I'm done, I've created a perfect whole design."

Alloc's perspective differed substantially in that he treated his designs as puppets to be pulled by his strings. His puppets were never meant to think or feel for themselves, and they did not deserve any special treatment.

Ves couldn't say which one was better. They both excelled in different circumstances. A programmer like Alloc was used to exerting a high degree of control over his creations. Ves on the other hand left a lot of autonomy to the mech pilot and whatever image took root in his mech.

Their shuttle quickly arrived at its destination and docked inside the hangar of a combat carrier called the Stubby Growler.

The Growler was a hefty combat carrier that conveyed around fifty spaceborn mechs and spares. Designed as a commander center, her class held fewer mechs than the other classes of combat carriers in the Vandal fleet, but made up for it in the thickness of her armor and her powerful means of communications.

"Major Verle would like to see you." A junior officer greeted them as the two mech designers stepped onto the deck of the crowded hangar bay. "Please follow."

They jostled their way through mech technicians performing last-minute repair jobs and mechs slowly walking away from the repair bays and into a position where they could launch at a moment's notice.

From the activity in this hangar bay, Ves got a good read on the attitude of the Vandals. Everyone radiated eagerness in a way that made him feel as if he was in the middle of a pack of wolves drooling at a juicy prey off in the distance. The mech pilots in particular displayed barely checked aggression. They couldn't wait to dive into the Vesians and tear their mechs apart.

They exited the hangar bay and climbed up a couple of decks. After traversing a couple of winded corridors and passing through a number of security checks, they entered what appeared to be a command center. Over two-dozen specialists sat behind a number of varied consoles, and they managed everything from sensors to mech deployment.

Guided by the young officer, they approached the grey-haired officer looking down on the central plot from an elevated seat. The man obviously possessed the physique of a mech pilot and looked as if he could still fight on for a couple of decades more.

"Mr. Brandstad, good to see you again!"

"Major Verle, it's a pleasure."

"And who is this young fellow?"

"This is Ves Larkinson, an Apprentice Mech Designer under my wing."

"Larkinson, you say? Is he related to...?"

Here we go again, Ves sighed. "I am part of the famous Larkinson Family, sir."

Everyone he met so far treated the Larkinson name with respect. Not so for Major Verle. As soon as Ves confirmed his lineage, the Major's face turned flat. "I suggest you take your cues from Mr. Brandstad and stay out of our way. We cannot afford any distractions during the heat of battle. Understood?"

"Understood, sir!"

Did the man got duped by a Larkinson or something? Or did he know the true story behind Colonel Lowenfield's exile, and felt indignant on behalf of his superior?

Both Ves and Alloc sat down on a pair of basic seats meant for guests. They quietly observed the proceedings as the Vandal fleet closed in on the hapless garrison fleet that had strayed too far from its base to call for reinforcements.

"What's our job here?" Ves whispered to Alloc.

"We're here to serve as technical advisors. We assist Major Verle in identifying the weaknesses of enemy mechs and answer any questions he might pose to us as long as it falls under our area of expertise. However, don't mistake this assignment as a way to command over mechs. We are not here to usurp Major Verle's authority."

"Does this mean we stay shut most of the time?"

"There's definitely a lot of waiting involved. Unless it's truly urgent, don't speak up unless our advice is called for. I expect we won't be needed during the upcoming battle against the garrison fleet. It's when our detachment enters into the orbit of Detemen IV that we'll be needed. In the meantime, I suggest you while away your time by studying up on the data that is made available to us. There's a projector embedded inside the armrest. Squeeze this part here to turn it on."

Ves did as he was told and a small projected terminal appeared in front of his face. As he explored its interface, he found out that the terminal mainly presented sensor readings to him. The AIs in charge of interpreting the raw data already translated the observed mechs in the distance into a number of familiar Vesian designs.

"First, study the sensor readings and double-check the designs. Many designs used by the Vesians are continually developing, just like our three designs, so there will always be minor and major variations between the iterations. Before the Vandals enter into battle, we have to make sure that we pinned down the exact versions and provide accurate estimates of their specs."

"Understood. I'm on it."

Ves hadn't expected to do something like this, but he couldn't complain. At least he wasn't one of those poor bums who would soon be deployed to the surface of the moons and Detemen IV.

Due to his extensive knowledge, Ves rapidly adjusted to his job of analyzing the mechs identified by the AIs. The enemy fleet had finally found out that they had been lured into a trap. Their carriers frantically turned around to head back to the lunar fortress above Detemen IV, but they couldn't beat the awesome amount of inertia that slowly brought them to their inevitable doom.

At this moment of time, the Vandal fleet hadn't split up into two detachments yet. Colonel Lowenfield wanted to keep her assets together and crush the Vesian garrison fleet in a single blow.

Unfortunately, the enemy did the smart thing.

"The garrison fleet is splitting up!"

Chapter 457 Split Up

Battles between two hostile fleets had always been rare even during the golden age of warships. Space was too vast and ships moved at a snail's pace compared to the scale of an average star system. Though technology advanced and ships these days traversed a lot faster than their predecessors from the Age of Conquest, it was safe to say not a lot of battles actually took place.

The main reason why was because fleets often saw each other coming. Space was empty, so therefore an approaching enemy would always be spotted many hours before they actually arrived at their targets.

Accounting for the lag due to the speed of light needing time to travel from the outer system to the inner system couldn't be applied. A well-defended star system was littered with sensors that relayed their up-to-date readings to a hidden quantum entanglement node that instantly sent the observations to the inner system.

Basically, surprise attacks were rare and hard to pull off. Most battles in space happened because the two sides thought they both stood a chance of winning it. Once a side believed that they didn't stand a chance of winning the impending battle, they wouldn't hesitate to cut and run.

"Cowards!" Major Verle swore and slammed his fist against the armrest of his command chair. A myriad of projections appeared before his eyes. He studied them rapidly before issuing new commands.

In the meantime, the flagship of the Vandals relayed new deployments. The Vandals would split off as many ships as it took to run down each escaping Vesian vessel and crush them into bits. Due to the differences in speed, the Vandals would still be able to go after the individual ships. It would just take a lot more time and bring some of their ships off-course.

"The Vesians are delaying the inevitable." Alloc explained to Ves. Though Ves had seen a lot more action on the ground, Alloc had sat in a command center for more than two-dozen times in his career. "Splitting up their fleet is a test of our priorities. While the Vesians are letting us mop them up one by one, they're forcing us to spread out mech forces thin. One of our combat carriers won't be enough to defeat one of the Vesian combat carriers without sustaining severe losses."

"So we are sending out two ships in pursuit of each Vesian ship?"

"Exactly. That's the only way we can insure a crushing victory with very few losses."

Already, the Vandals started to redeploy. Many combat carriers split up from the main fleet and spread out into pairs. Each pair moved to intercept the frantic Vesian combat carriers.

While their defeat wasn't in question, the delay they imposed on their timetables meant that the Vandals suffered a very consequential setback. They only had four days at most to accomplish their objective and be on their way out before the Vesian reinforcements arrived.

"How long will we be delayed if we try to stick to the plan?"

"Not sure." Alloc grunted. "I'm not an expert in complex space maneuvers. At a guess, I would say that if the Vandals are keen on sticking together, we might be delayed by as much as half a day."

This placed a decent amount of pressure over Colonel Lowenfield's shoulders. Either she would wait until they completely chased down the Vesians and annihilated them, or she would decide to split up the fleet into three.

Two of the detachments would move towards the two inhabited planets as planned, but the third detachment that consisted of the chasers would linger in the outer system until they completely mopped up the garrison fleet. After that, they should return to the other two detachments as fast as possible, but due to the differences in relative speeds, it would take a while for them to catch up.

At the very least, the stragglers wouldn't be able to assist the other two detachments as they initiated their battles against the remnant loyalist forces on those planets.

Ves did not envy Lowenfield's position. Both choices came with a lot of risks that could make or break this bold assault.

"What would you choose to do, sir?"

"I'd take the safe option and stick together. There's no guarantee that the intelligence that the rebels have gathered is accurate. The Vesians might have buried a hidden base somewhere, and offer a stiffer resistance than we expected."

Too many things could go wrong during this operation. What Alloc mentioned was only one of the ways in which the battle could turn against their favor. Ves thought back on the rebels and questioned whether they would truly be able to suppress the loyalist forces that were keen to root them out. It was an unquestioned fact that the rebels would never be able to subvert the mech pilots. They enjoyed too much privilege to turn against the local regimes.

Eventually, Colonel Lowenfield came to a decision. New orders showed up which stated that the rest of the Vandal fleet would continue according to schedule, but with around six-hundred Vandal mechs less.

The Stubby Growler took on an important role within second detachment that headed towards Detemen IV. The command center buzzed and grew busy as they tried to coordinate their formation after the loss of vital spaceborn assets. Missing a few hundred mechs put a severe dent into their defensive envelope.

As the larger offshoot of the Vandals raced towards Detemen IV, Ves and Alloc paid a keen amount of attention to the relentless chase.

The garrison fleet might have been able to divert some of the Vandals, but they payed a grievous price for it. With each ship looking out for themselves, they all faced twice as much mechs.

For the first time in his life, Ves finally witnessed the Inheritors in action in a live battle. Even as he kept his eyes on the live footage, he also kept analyzing the readings that continued to pour in. With his help, the AIs refined their identification and determined the exact mech models used by the Vesian garrison fleet.

"They're goners for sure." Alloc remarked as he beheld the list of mech models. "All of these are second-line designs. They're cheap and haven't been updated in years."

The battles that ensued underscored the disparity in strength. Each fleeing Vesian combat carrier fell behind in terms of the quantity and quality of mechs they could deploy.

The Vandals employed their advantages as hard as possible. Hordes of Inheritors sprung from the hangar bays and raced around the the trajectory of their prey, seeking to cut off its escape route.

Their extremely high speeds allowed them to outpace the best efforts of the fleeing ships. In the meantime, the Hellcats accompanied by a diverse menagerie of mechs stolen from Vesian factories and depots harried their rear.

Pincered from behind and in front, the ships futilely tried to wriggle out their way, but failed.

"The first ship is already going down!"

The first battle that broke out ended the fastest as well. The Inheritors straightforwardly slammed into the formation of the Vesian garrison mechs just as they focused on repelling the Hellcats and the other Vandal mechs.

It was then that Ves witnessed the true value of the Inheritors. If given enough assistance, the Inheritors wouldn't suffer too much as they approached their targets. Once they got into melee range, they would make mincemeat out of practically every spaceborn mechs.

Only a handful of knights and other melee mechs lasted a little longer against the Inheritors, but the fall of their ranged mechs quickly led to being piled up multitudes of Inheritors.

"They're like a hive of angry bees." Ves softly uttered. "Individually, they're weak. Together, they are strong."

Their speed and swarming potential lent themselves well in these pursuits. Multitudes of Vesian carriers self-destructed as soon as it became clear that they wouldn't get away. Naturally, their captains issued evacuation orders beforehand. Thousands of escape pods flung into every direction just before the carriers exploded.

Ves keenly looked on to see what the Vandals decided to do with the escape pods. Would they capture the fleeing Vesians, shoot at their defenseless pods or leave them be?

Major Verle sent out a message to another commander. "Ignore the escape pods. We don't have time to process them. Get back to us as soon as possible."

As the first battle ended in a tedious but predictable victory, the second detachment had almost reached the vicinity of Detemen IV. More information started to pour into their terminals as their rebel allies supplied more data over their quantum entanglement nodes.

The current status looked worse than expected.

[MTA FORTRESS: PASSIVE. NO SIGNS OF INTERVENTION.]

[LUNAR FORTRESS: UPRISING QUELLED. REBELLION SUFFERED HEAVY CASUALTIES. MANY VESIAN MECHS REMAIN OPERATIONAL. SUPPLIES DESTROYED OR SABOTAGED.]

[MECH RESEARCH BASE: INTACT. NO ATTEMPTS MADE TO OVERRUN THE RESEARCH BASE DUE TO INABILITY TO OVERRUN THE LUNAR FORTRESS. DEFENSES ARE LIGHT, BUT PREPARED.]

[DETEMEN IV: HEAVY RIOTING IN EVERY POPULATION CENTER. MANY MECH REGIMENTS HAVE BEEN TAKEN DOWN, BUT REBEL FORCES ARE EXHAUSTED. CHAOS AND ANARCHY IS SPREADING DUE TO FAILING SERVICES. LORD JAVIER HAS GONE INTO HIDING. UNABLE TO ASCERTAIN LOCATION, BUT EVERY SHUTTLE OR SHIP THAT ATTEMPTS TO ASCEND IS SHOT DOWN.]

The news spread to the rest of the command center as well, causing everyone to frown. Major Verle chewed over the issue for a moment before hardening his eyes. "If we delay even once, we'll rapidly fall behind, and it will be impossible to meet our goals set out for this operation. Continue forward and maintain course!"

A new series of orders spread to the mechs that would soon be deployed to finish the jobs that the rebels hadn't managed to complete. Though the rebels ran out steam a lot faster than anticipated, the Flagrant Vandals had never counted on their allies to do the heavy lifting.

What the rebels accomplished so up to this point gave the vandals enough of an opening to drive through a wedge. Their first concern was the lunar fortress on the second moon.

"Mr. Brandstad!"

"Yes, Major?!"

"Go over the battle logs the rebels has sent us and determine the weaknesses of the surviving Vesian mechs. Find a way to topple them in a single blow!"

"On it!"

Ves naturally joined Alloc into scouring through the logs and battle footage. They encountered a lot of difficulties in this because the rebels hadn't exactly been stellar at maintaining logs. Many of the pieces they sent to the Vandals came in fragments, as some of the data had to be salvaged from corpses of wrecks.

Nevertheless, the footage painted a fairly simple picture of the defending forces. "They started out with half a mech regiment of House Eneqqin's household troops. They sustained a lot of losses, but at least five to six-hundred mechs remain operational. The outer fortifications are all intact, but many of the turrets have been taken out of action."

"What of their mech composition?"

"They are predominately lunar gravity-optimized landbound mechs. They have a heavy propensity for rifleman mechs, which are ideal for defending a static fortification. The good news is that their primary weapons are equally divided

between laser rifles and ballistic rifles. The rebels managed to destroy most of their ammunition stockpiles, so their ballistic rifleman mechs will only have a few magazines left each."

That still left them with a defensive advantage. With the absence of the mechs that chased after the garrison fleet, Major Verle had no choice but to deploy his remaining forces against the lunar base with much less of an advantage in numbers than he anticipated.

Though the defenders sounded like they were at the end of their ropes, cornered rats had a tendency to lash out hard.

Ignoring them exposed the rear of the Vandals to a surviving Vesian element, but overcoming them required the Vandals to pay a price that it could hardly stomach. Either way, Major Verle was in a very difficult position.

Chapter 458 Breakdown

The assault on the Detemen System had gone off on a rocky start.

Nevertheless, the appearance of the 6th Flagrant Vandals in what the Vesia Kingdom considered its heartland came as a huge shock to both sides of the war.

The Mech Corps barely exerted any oversight on the Vandals. Whenever someone in high command got reminded of their existence, they brushed the motley mech regiment off as a bunch of cowardly raiders too scared to man up and attack the Mech Legion.

Everyone had made a serious mistake in underestimating the Flagrant Vandals.

Living up to the name of their mech regiment, the Flagrant Vandals smashed everyone's expectations and struck at one of the Imodris Duchy's more significant industrial systems.

The damage already dealt to its infrastructure came as a heavy blow, but the Vandals had only just begun. The local rebels did most of the damage so far, and now it was time for the Vandals to deliver on their promises.

The attack on Detemen II still needed time to form. The first detachment of the Vandal fleet approached the smaller planet and its valuable solar foundries with greedy anticipation. Count Reizen rallied every household troop of House Jier to form a line of defense around the most important asset of the planet, its renewable exotics mine.

This left much of the planet undefended, including its various complexes and the solar foundries spinning in orbit. Count Reizen made the determination that he couldn't spread his limited household troops to defend everything, so he concentrated them all to form a deterrent.

Basically, the count told the incoming Vandals to wreck everything else but the possession he prized the most.

Naturally, many industrialists did not agree to become House Reizen's sacrificial lambs. Due to panic and indecision, they rebelled or sowed chaos on Detemen II, which ironically paved the way for the incoming Vandals.

Count Reizen and the people of the Detemen System couldn't be blamed for their confusing responses. Complacency lay at the heart of their incompetence. Even as the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom battled at the frontlines, the Mech Corps never raided as far as Imodris.

While the border systems endured so many raids that they responded like a well-oiled machine when faced with another incursion, the complacent people of Detemen II and IV had never dealt with such a massive attack.

"Rise up, comrades!" A ferocious woman stood atop a wrecked laser turret as she bared her rifle in the air. "The time has come to pull down the nobles from their lofty perches!"

In the hot and sweltering environment of Detemen II, half of her crowd wore thin climate suits that allowed them to stay cool. Both suited and unsuited people cheered and raised their arms, though their numbers and enthusiasm fell a little short.

The rally hadn't lasted more than a couple of minutes before a series of thuds started transmitting from the ground.

"Footsteps... mechs! Incoming mechs!"

"It's a company mech! Run!"

No one kid themselves into thinking they could fight against a machine of war. The fear of mechs had set in deep among the population. Before the rebel woman could persuade her crowd otherwise, her audience had completely scurried away before the Jier mechs even arrived.

Seeing that the situation went to hell pretty fast, the rebel woman abandoned her elevated perch and ran away for safety as well. "Bunch of spineless cowards!"

Unlike the haphazard unrest wracking Detemen II, the situation on Detement IV deteriorated into full-blown anarchy.

"Hahahaha! We're rich!" A man shouted as he looted a luxury store inside a mall. Though he had no idea how he could sell his ill-gotten loot of luxury clothes, just the thought of obtaining decades-worth his salary in booty made him delirious.

Just as the handful of men ran towards their aircar, a volley of laser and projectile fire spat in their direction. The aim of the assailants was atrocious, but the sheer volume of fire eventually struck down all of the looters.

A swarm of teenagers emerged from the corners and dashed towards the fallen men. They quickly deprived them of their loot and made their way out, giggling and laughing all the while.

Elsewhere, two company forces guarding two adjacent manufacturing complexes clashed against each other in a full-blown battle.

"Stop this madness!" The commander of the defense force at Westcott Machinery Supply broadcasted in the open. The man piloted his knight to withstand another barrage of incoming fire for his ranged mechs. "The rebels are burning everything down and the Brighters are about to make landfall! This is no time to settle our grudges!"

A maddened laughter escaped the speakers of a gaudily-decorated cannoneer mech from United Alloy Supplies. It blasted its ballistic cannon indiscriminately towards the Westcott forces.

"I always hated seeing you parade your mechs in front of our faces! Now, I finally get the opportunity to do you Westcott goons in!"

"You won't get away with this!" The Westcott commander shouted back as his knight mech bashed its way to the front and slammed its shield mech against a spearman mech that hadn't moved away in time. "Westcott forever!"

"Westcott forever!" The mech pilots of the defending mechs echoed.

None of them questioned whether it made sense to defend a facility while the rest of the planet went crazy. Their loyalty to their company compelled them to fight, if not to the bitter end, then at least they should give a good accounting.

Yet the attackers were no slouches either. "Victory to UAS!"

"Victory to UAS!"

Civilians ran towards old and neglected shelters. Troublemakers sought their chance to even the scores against their rivals. The rebels fanned the flames by destroying key infrastructure and inciting mass panic.

All the while, the auxiliary regiments that turned traitor took control over enough anti-air turrets to make every ascent into space a risky prospect. They also deployed hidden missile launchers throughout Detemen IV to augment their air defense and bring down any vessel that tried to escape the planet.

Dozens of ships and shuttles fell before everyone learned their lesson. Unless they boarded a heavily armored combat carrier, they wouldn't dream about making another attempt.

The rebels still kept up their guard. They knew that Lord Javier was on the surface when the rebellion broke out. He might still be biding his time to get away aboard an armored or stealthed escape vessel, so they pulled out all the stops and constantly scanned the surroundings of the capital city.

High above the skies and beyond Detemen IV's atmosphere, the second detachment of the Vandal fleet approached the moons. Two of them posed a considerable concern to Major Verle. Without securing those two locations, he wouldn't feel reassured when he deployed his landbound mechs to the planet.

"Mr. Brandstad! Give me something!"

"We're working on it!" Alloc frazzedly replied. Both Ves and Alloc scoured through tons of data in order to find a way to ease the next actions.

Neither Ves nor Alloc found any obvious weaknesses in the laser rifleman mechs that formed the main line of defense at the lunar fortress.

The focus lay on the Amevon Mark VII Type D, which served as House Eneqqin's standard rearguard mech model. The House's in-house designers formed the Type D as a simpler and more affordable variant of their much more renowned Type A design.

The Type A was an impressive laser rifleman mech design that formed the mainstay of House Eneqqin's household troops. Therefore, a cheaper variant derived from it wouldn't be so easy to crack. The Type D inherited most of the Type A's strengths while hardly exposing any weaknesses.

Obviously, a lot of effort had been put into optimizing its design. Hundreds of mech designers spent many thousands of man-hours into working away its flaws. Try as he might, Ves peered at the Type D's design from every direction but couldn't put a dent in its seemingly perfect exterior.

"I don't believe this design is perfect! No design is perfect!"

The only weaknesses of the Type D they came up with so far were the generic ones that all laser rifleman mechs suffered from, such as their low burst damage and their vulnerability up close.

Even a toddler could figure that out. Ves had to dig deeper and find something more pertinent in order to make the upcoming battle a little easier for the Vandals.

Fortunately, he wasn't working alone. Alloc possessed a lot of experience in this area, and he quickly honed in on a potential weakness. "Ves! Study its heat dispersal mechanisms! I remember that the Mark VI version of the Type A relies on disposable coolants to get rid of most of its heat in an instant. If the coolant tank got burst, the mech's internals almost always glitched out. See if this still applies for the Mark VII!"

The Amevon series had progressed by a major milestone since those weaknesses became known. Its designers must have certainly patched up the vulnerabilities, but they wouldn't have been able to mitigate the problem completely. The Type D possessed too little structure to do so.

Now that Alloc shone a light in a potentially promising direction, Ves rapidly called up past data on the Mark VI and Mark VII versions of the Type A and

Type D. Most of the intelligence had been derived through a combination of analyzing past battle footage and stealing sensitive design documents by the intelligence services of the Republic.

This caused the data to be largely incomplete. Ves had to struggle through gaping holes and unreliable guesswork, but eventually he found a chink in the armor.

"I think they changed the placement of the coolant tank to the center and inwards! However, the discharge mechanisms are largely the same! It's harder to breach the coolant tank, but if our boys can manage it, the Type D's will certainly be taken out of commission!"

"Good work Ves, but it's not enough!"

They passed on the information to Major Verle anyway. This kept the mech commander off their backs for a tiny bit. The two mech designers continued to study the active cooling systems of the Type, knowing that there must be more they could find out.

"Deploying spaceborn mechs!"

A large number of spaceborn mechs launched from the hangar bays of the combat carriers and took up guard positions. For the assault of the lunar fortress, Major Verle wanted to drop close but not quite on top of the Vesian defenders.

With most of the turrets taken out by the rebels, the Vesian anti-air capabilities had become severely curtailed. While the Vandals still had to be wary of their rifleman mechs, Major Verle gambled on the possibility would be able to drop onto the surface without suffering any losses.

Ves thought that Verle had made a very bold bet.

Minutes away from starting the descent of half of their combat carriers, Ves finally achieved a breakthrough in his analysis!

"Reporting! The Amavon Mark VII Type D's are vulnerable to explosive and kinetic damage to their lower left sides! The armor doesn't need to be breached in order to cripple it. The Type D skimmed on their structural integrity, so it won't be able to shield its internals against the concussive shocks from explosive and kinetic attacks."

Ves sent along his analysis of the weakness. Attacking the lower left side of the Type D's would potentially allow their assailants to take them out with up to fifty percent less effort than taking it out conventionally!

"That's more like it!" Major Verle complimented him for once. "Switch up the first wave! I want the missileers up front and advance to medium range before unleashing their payloads! Bring the Akkara's up front as well!"

"Sir, that would leave our carriers undefended!"

"Then hold the Hellcats and a couple of Inheritors back! They won't be of much use in the coming attack!"

The last-minute adjustments made it clear that Major Verle was prepared to stake the lives of his men and women over the vulnerability revealed by the mech designers.

This caused Ves to gulp. It was all well and good to state his observations, but if he spoke incorrectly, a lot of lives would be lost due to his words. Sweat poured down his brow as he watched the coming action with a lot of apprehension.

Chapter 459 Lunar Fortress

Even before the combat carriers made landfall, the lunar fortress unleashed a deluge of missiles. Much less than what they ought to have been able to launch, but still a considerable amount.

Major Verle quickly issued orders to strike down the missile salvo. Akkara mechs anchored inside the bunkers along the exterior the of carriers started to fire their rapid-fire cannons in unison. They had been designed in part to provide a powerful form of defense against the Vesian propensity to throw out a lot of missiles. The incoming missile salvo already started to diminish.

Other mechs lent their firepower as well, though their coordination was lacking. The Vandals relied too much on random mech models stolen from the Vesians. Their weapon configurations differed very widely, making it difficult to synchronize their fire.

Nevertheless, the spaceborn Vandals acted competently and wiped out the missile salvo just as it entered medium range.

The lunar fortress failed to launch a second salvo. It appeared that the rebels hadn't been lying when they said that they destroyed most of their stockpiles. Still, the suspicion that the Vesians might be holding back their missiles in order to trap the Vandals loomed closely.

With the lunar fortress offering no further response, the Vandal combat carriers that arrived on the surface calmly disgorged their landbound mechs. Many of these machines suffered from unsteady footing. The small moon exhibited a very weak gravity, causing most mech pilots to curse as their feet constantly bounced them above the surface.

Fortunately, they adjusted quickly. A week before they arrived at the Detemen System, the mech pilots of the Flagrant Vandals drilled extensively in every possible environment they might be deployed on. They already learned how to deal with the second moon's gravity, but simulations were no substitute for the real thing. They wouldn't be as good as the defending Vesians in moving around, and that was a significant disadvantage.

The only upside to the moon's weak gravity was that the Vandal spaceborn mechs could lend a hand as well. They didn't fare too well under standard gravity conditions, but the moon was so small and weak that their flight systems hardly needed to compensate.

The Vandal mechs formed up. Due to the wide variety of mech models, they resembled a mob of pirate mechs more than a professional military formation. The only attempt at homogenizing them was to coat their exteriors in the regimental colors of the Flagrant Vandals, burgundy and black.

Even then, many subgroups adopted their own patterns. Some mechs employed camouflage patterns, while others adorned their mechs with animal heads. More utilized geometrical patterns that looked oddly hypnotic.

In the eyes of an outsider like Ves, the Vandal mechs looked disorderly. He could tell from the orders issued by Major Verle and the movements of their mechs that they operated in a very decentralized fashion. Major Verle only issued a handful of broad orders, which his subordinate officers translated into slightly more specific orders to the different companies that took part in the assault.

The true decision makers appear to be the captains that led their companies. These companies differed widely in numbers and mech makeup. Some of them were at half-strength at twenty-two mechs, while one of them moved with seventy mechs, each of them seemingly a different model!

As much as Ves wanted to spit out and decry the travesty of it all, the Flagrant Vandals somehow found order in chaos. They made their eclectic mix of mechs work seamlessly. Upon closer inspection, Ves realized that every mech company wasn't grouped by type or purpose and that they didn't choose to balance out their mechs either.

The companies had been grouped according to their movement speed.

This led to a surprising level of coordinated maneuvering. The scout companies moved first and approached the lunar fortress, which the Vesians chose to perch on a low hill surrounded by flattened terrain.

A lot of signs showed that the perimeter used to be very rocky, but the defenders deliberately cleared away the rocks and flattened the overall surroundings in order to deny any approaching enemy on land the benefit of cover.

"Heat signatures detecting! Incoming laser fire!"

The mechs atop the walls already started firing potshots at the approaching scout companies from the air and on the surface of the moon. Major Verle made a quick judgement and held his scouts on a leash, not wishing to go further and risk them getting attacked by a prepared volley.

The slower companies caught up while the scouts flanked the fortress. After a few more moments of preparation, the assault began.

"Attack! Breach the fortress and finish off the defenders!"

A heavy amount of firepower poured into the walls of the fortress, diminishing it at a surprisingly low pace. The walls had been laced with an abundant amount of junk exotics as well as a few more valuable substances, which was much more than standard. The cost to erect this fortress must be at least three times as much as a regular fortification!"

"The Detemen II is a resource processing center." Alloc reminded Major Verle. "Many materials are shipped in and out of this star system. Those fortress walls are laced with Brown Laxanite, which is famed for their ability to dampen shocks. That increases the resilience of the walls by at least half!"

"Is there anything else you can tell about the walls, Mr. Brandstad?"

Alloc furrowed his brows. Ves passed him a couple of observations, but none of them were notable enough to be mentioned.

"No, sir, only to state that the walls rely on Laxanite to withstand explosive and kinetic attacks, while utilizing their enormous mass to neuter any laser fire. It's incredibly resilient against every conventional damage type."

That left out a lot of weapons with strange effects, such as the Greater Terran United Confederation's Destroyer Weapons. One slice of a Destroyer Sword would easily be able to part the thick walls in half.

Naturally, the Vandals didn't carry anything like that.

"We're going to have to do this the old-fashioned way. Inheritors! Prepare to dive in!"

Major Verle constantly showed his impatience. Ves gathered that the commander wasn't being reckless, but the importance of staying on schedule weighed heavily on the entire mech regiment.

They only had four days to play with, and that was only an estimate of their allotted time. The Vesian reinforcements might come sooner or later, but the Vandals didn't count on getting lucky in that regard.

While much of the lower ranks of the Vandals remained ignorant, Colonel Lowenfield and her most trusted subordinates like Major Verle planned for this operation for years. They always intended to make a far-ranging raid on a star system deep within Kingdom space.

The Detemen System had actually been selected as a potential longshot candidate due to its stability, relative wealth and lack of internal conflicts.

That last point proved to be pivotal to this attack. Many star systems with a little bit more wealth might allow the Vandals to earn a bigger harvest, but their riches attracted plenty of ambitious nobles.

Not so for this star system. Detemen II was the main seat of House Jier, and while it would be possible to dislodge them, Count Reizen established lots of ties with his neighbors, which minimized the occurrence of violent conflicts.

As for Detemen IV, no one wanted to touch Lord Javier. As the sole son of Count Loqer, any other local noble would practically be committing suicide if they touched that planet.

Count Loqer's influence in the Imodris Duchy made him a powerful regional bully. He was the trusted hand of the Duchess and had served as her former chief of staff.

With the amount of favor Loqer earned from the Duchess of Imodris, House Eneqqin was on the rise. No one openly dared to defy them. Yet while this status might make their rivals back away, it proved to be one of the most pivotal reasons why the Vandals chose to attack the Detemen System.

House Imodris sent the majority of their legions to the frontlines. Those that remained had been tasked with guarding the Duchy's capital and several vitally important star systems. As much as the Duchess favored Count Loqer, she would never divert her crack troops to defend a marginally significant star system.

Because behind the open threat of the Vandals, a follow-up invasion might ensue if the remaining legions moved to aid the Detemen System.

As for the barons and counts that occupied the star systems closest to the Detemen System, they would definitely move to support their beleaguered neighbors when prompted by House Imodris, but they would be sure to take the slowest route possible without being accused of leaving the Detemen System out to dry.

"No one will come and reinforce the Detemen System for at least three days. That should be enough time to complete all of our objectives, but only if nothing else goes wrong."

The Vandals made slow progress into chipping away at the fort walls. Their ability to resist both energy and physical attacks made them extremely hard to deal with. Due to the angles, the landbound mechs stood no chance in weakening the defending mechs.

The defenders did not suffer from that problem as the Vandal mechs were exposed on flat terrain. They could easily fire on every mech they wished from their comfortably elevation positions behind the walls.

The only reason why the Vesians hadn't exacted a heavier toll was because they were pacing their fire. Ballistic ammunition was in really short supply, and while they could replenish their batteries fairly quickly by recharging them from the fortifications power reactors, they could only recover so much juice at a given moment.

More than that, the Type D's paced their fire due to their inability to shunt their heat fast enough. Every time they built up a significant amount of heat, they retreated and deployed several spikes from their hips that anchored into the walls. This allowed them to transfer their accumulating heat through the spikes and stave off their heat limits, if only temporarily.

"The Inheritors are making their move!" Alloc whispered to Ves, which caused him to divert more attention to their plummeting descent.

They dove down on a diagonal trajectory, making it rather hard for the defending Type D's to target them. Several Inheritors got hit by the laser beams that raked their loose formation. A single laser beam wouldn't cripple them, but their armor was so thin that they would certainly feel the hurt.

The Vesian defenders became a little smarter about their targeting and started to focus their fire on a handful of Inheritors. This caused the targeted mechs to be extremely unlucky.

While the mech pilots of the Type D's weren't good enough to box their targets in an undodgeable storm of lasers, they at least managed to whittle down the Inheritors at a mildly alarming rate. Those assigned to pilot the Inheritors weren't exactly the best of what the Flagrant Vandals had to offer.

"Men, ready your knives!"

Still, the Inheritors zipped down so fast that the Type D's constantly had to readjust their aim to cope with the changing trajectories. As the Inheritors appeared larger and larger on their targeting scopes, the Type D's needed to swivel their aim in wider arcs in order to keep up.

"The time is upon us! Go in-and-out!"

The Inheritors engaged their flight systems in full, causing them to stop their impending crash to the ground and instead propel them forward, right into the lines of defenders. A handful of melee mechs stepped forth to shield their weaker comrades. The Inheritors that faced those melee mechs could do nothing in the short term to take these sturdy mechs down, so they preemptively circled around and flew back up.

As for the other Inheritors, they faced no obstacle except for the wall, and even that provided no succor to the Type D's. The Inheritors smartly passed over the walls and maneuvered around to hit the Type D mechs from the sides or from the rear.

The laser rifleman mechs stood no chance. The Inheritors showed extreme excellence in peeling apart the vulnerable ranged mechs. At least a third of the Type D's dropped their rifles and gripped their backup knives in time, but their mech frames were wholly unsuited to duel against a skirmisher.

It was a massacre.

Only ten seconds passed at most before the Inheritors finished their allotted time. Those that hadn't finished off their targets retreated without hesitation after reaching the limit.

The results of the short but intense action quickly became clear. At the cost of half a dozen Inheritors, at least a third of the defending Type D's had been taken out.

"We've got them!"

Chapter 460 Research Base

Ves couldn't help but feel relieved that his educated guess panned out. Analyzing the Amavon Mark VII Type D on the fly was very difficult because Ves could only base his conclusions from past versions of the mech model and its visible performance.

It was as if he cracked the code of a simple keypad by observing it from a distance and looking at the marks left behind.

After the initial pass, the Inheritors turned around and dove again. Combined with the push of the Vandal landbound mechs, the defenders faced a hellish dilemma. They needed to pour their firepower to the encroaching ground pounders. Once the Vandal melee mechs reached the walls, it was over. Yet if they neglecting the Inheritors buzzing above, they'd be dead as well.

Ves didn't know if their commander was stupid or desperate, but around half of the rifleman mechs focused on each of the Vandal threats.

This happened to be one of the better outcomes for the Flagrant Vandals. By splitting up the attention of their enemy, they insured that they spread their fire. Though the individual mechs still focused their fire on a couple of hand-selected targets, the Vandals already started to adjust.

Any mech that got targeted would instantly retreat or find cover from their comrades. They did everything possible to spoil the aim of their enemies, and if they couldn't hold on, their pilots would eject regardless of the waste.

This preserved the lives of the mech pilots but led to a slight increase in wrecked mechs. Still, as long as the Vandals won the field, they would easily be able to salvage their fallen mechs and bring them back online.

Of course, the true prize in this assault would be to salvage the enemy mechs. Though they weren't all that valuable, the Flagrant Vandals brought out a lot of transports, and their logistics ships held an abundant amount of cargo holds as well.

Unless the Vandals encountered a large stash of exotics, recovering mechs was always the most cost-efficient option. They took up less space and weighed a little less than containers worth the same amount.

Nevertheless, this attack would generally be considered a loss. A lot of damage had been sustained that needed to be repaired later on. This drained a lot of money, but also wasted a lot of time that could have been put to more productive uses. Overall, Ves estimated the Vandals lost more than they would be able to salvage from the battlefield.

The pressure on the Flagrant Vandals therefore continued to pile up. If they weren't able to raid the the wealth-laden surface of Detemen IV very soon, the mech regiment would certainly succumb under all of the debt it accrued.

"Without the support of the Mech Corps, the Vandals judge every action according to how much money they would gain or lose."

It was an awful way to run a mech regiment because it led to overly mercenary decision making. What was best for the Flagrant Vandals might not be best for the Mech Corps and the Bright Republic. Ves had seen plenty of

the Vandals to know that they wouldn't lose much sleep if they worked against the Republic's interests.

The key figure here was Colonel Lowenfield. From what he heard, Lowenfield pulled the Vandals from the depths of despair by using her extensive administrative acumen to clean up their finances. Still, she could do only so much, hence the need for the attack on a fat sheep like the Detemen System.

"The Vesian defenders are pulling back!"

Emboldened by the sudden decrease in enemy fire aimed in their direction, the Inheritors boldly dove at the rifleman mechs over and over again. They leveraged their speed to the highest order and completely threw the defenders in disarray with their maniacal upfront passes.

Under these circumstances, the casualties of the defenders rapidly piled up while the Inheritors lost less and less mechs with each pass. Eventually, the Vesian mechs broke and abandoned the outer wall. They contracted their lines and congregated at a smaller but more defensible inner wall.

The Inheritors pulled back into the sky while the landbound mechs slowly climbed over the outer walls and made their way to the inner walls.

At this point, Ves pretty much considered the battle to be over. The ballistic rifleman mechs already expended most of their ammunition by now, and the laser rifleman mechs lost too many of their number to pose a serious threat to the Vandals.

Everyone in the command center loosened their shoulders. Even Major Verle started to sit back in his chair. As long as the Vesians holed up in the inner sanctum of the lunar fortress didn't spring them a surprise, the moon was as good as conquered.

"How is the assault on the research base progressing?" Major Verle turned to another officer who had been tasked with taking care of the third moon.

"Sir, we have been forced to halt our mech deployment when we detected signs of heightened mech activity."

Verle frowned. "What have you detected?"

"Resonance."

Everyone briefly paused when they heard that word. Resonance could be detected at a fair distance under certain circumstances. Anytime a sensor detected resonance, a lot of other sensors would point their arrays in the direction in question.

"Is it confirmed?"

"It's confirmed, sir. The Vesian researchers aren't being circumspect about it. They're actively flaunting it as if to warn us back. In response, I aborted the drop lest we risk our combat carriers."

"You made the right decision."

The Vandals only allocated two companies to assault the research base, which should have been enough to overrun most bases of that size. As their ships orbited closer and closer to the moon, their scanners detected even less active mechs than projected. It should have been a cakewalk to take over the research base, but the presence of a resonating mech threw all of their projections out the window.

A heavy weight descended on the command center.

"Strength?"

"Thirteen laveres."

Some of the specialists let out a sigh. The resonance wasn't as strong as everyone feared. Ves incidentally learned a lot about resonance through the System, so he knew the significance of detecting a strength of 13 laveres.

One of the early pioneers of mech design came up with a standardized scale of measurement to determine the strength of resonance between an elite mech pilot and a mech that was geared for resonance. Master Laveré named his own scale after himself, and for some reason the entire mech industry accepted it over other proposed measurement units.

In a nutshell, a laveré measured the overall amplifying strength of resonance at a scale of 1 to 10,000.

An expert pilot that barely ascended into the ranks of the elites would measure just slightly above 1.

A newly ascended ace pilot possessed could exert at least 67 laverés of resonance.

God pilots started out with a whopping amount of 1545, and was theoretically able to flex their ability to resonate with mechs until they reached the arbitrary number 10,000.

What happened after that, nobody knew, because no god pilot ever lived to grow to such a monstrous level.

The exact mathematics behind the laveré scale was very complicated. The scale wasn't linear, so an expert mech that measured 20 laverés wasn't stronger than another expert mech that reached a level of resonance of only 10 laverés.

Nevertheless, the suspected expert mech within the research base could still inflict a massive amount of damage to the invading Vandal force with only 13 laverés of strength. Naturally, this depended heavily on the type and weight class of the expert's mech, but regardless of its form, no expert should be underestimated.

After a moment of consideration, Major Verle came to a momentous decision. "Put Venerable Rix O'Callahan on standby."

"Acknowledged, sir."

A moment passed before a communication channel forcibly opened up to the command center.

"Verle!" An irascible voice exploded. "I'm not going out!"

Everyone turned a little glum. Ves looked around a bit cluelessly until he started to get it. "This old man's voice..."

Was this Venerable O'Callahan?"

"Venerable, please. We have encountered signs of another expert, so we have no choice but to call for your services."

"Bah! I heard what's going on! A brat that can't resonate beyond thirteen laveres is not worth my time! Go pile up on him with a couple of hundred mechs and leave me alone!"

Major Verle looked like he wanted to explode, but he successfully kept himself from lashing out. He swiped his hand at an angle, causing a minor interference field to deploy that blocked their conversation. Ves wouldn't be able to eavesdrop any further.

"Is Venerable O'Callahan our expert pilot, sir?"

"For better or worse." Alloc sighed next to Ves. "The man's on the wane. He used to be a hotshot expert in the wars before, but age eventually takes its toll. He lashed out at the Republic for refusing to provide him with age-prolonging treatments. Ever since then, he assumed position as one of our resident expert pilots."

"Why isn't the Venerable trying his luck with the Coalition if he's so desperate to prolong his life?"

Alloc shook his head in pity. "Oh, he tried. He only spent two years bouncing from partner to partner until they all got fed up with him and chucked him back to our embrace."

Practically everyone worshipped expert pilots, so Ves found it strange that the Vandals regarded him with such indifference. It was yet another quirk to add to the list of oddities.

A few minutes passed by as Major Verle negotiated with Venerable O'Callahan. Ves and Alloc awkwardly sat at their seats. They didn't have much to do since the battle at the second moon was pretty much over while the battle at the third moon hadn't started yet.

The research base kept everything under wraps besides revealing the fact that they possessed an expert mech. Ves didn't know why they revealed one of their trump cards right off the bat. Shouldn't they have kept it hidden until the Vandals wandered into their trap? They could have killed a lot of Vandals with such a trick.

When Ves posed the question to Alloc, the Journeyman smiled ruefully at him. "Don't you see that we have military superiority? If the research base is staffed by loyal fanatics, sure they would want to wipe out as much of our numbers as possible. That they chose to forgo that choice shows that they are cowards who value their lives over any possible damage they can inflict on us. Revealing their expert mech up front is supposed to serve as a deterrent."

"Aren't the Vesians supposed to be motivated to die for the cause? Why are they acting so timidly?"

"You mistake their mech pilots for the rest of their society. Every mech pilot in the Mech Legion is willing to go to any extremes to earn a lot of merits in battle because if there is one thing the Vesia Kingdom is good at, it's with rewarding the families of their fallen. They know that they can die in peace,

knowing that their spouses will be taken care of and their children would be able to enter exclusive academies. In some extraordinary cases, their children may even be elevated to knight or baron to reward instances of exceptional valor."

In other words, it wasn't as if the Vesian mech pilots fought for an abstract cause. They fought for the same goals as any human, to better their lives and the lives of their families.

This motivating force was largely lost when it came to rearguard units and those that worked in a non-military capacity. Whoever called the shots at the research base did not wish to die in vain.

The interference field suddenly dropped. Major Verle glowered and gnashed his teeth as the comm channel closed by itself. "Recall orders to ready Venerable O'Callahan. The honorable expert pilot is... not feeling well enough to sortie."

Ves sat stunned as the rest of the Vandals accepted that sorry excuse. Although expert pilots enjoyed an elevated status in the Mech Corps, they had not reached the point where they could outright refuse a direct order from a superior.

This was the first time he had witnessed such an event.