

Chapter 461 Bestial

"Halt the planned attacks on the research base. We're moving on to the next phase."

Major Verle unwillingly retreated from the third moon. The ships under his command consolidated in orbit over the second moon and started to retrieve the mechs and loot from the fallen lunar fortress.

The battle there ended quickly once the Vandals overcame the inner walls. Not wishing to fight to the death, the defending Vesians surrendered without exception. For their part, the Vandals accepted their surrender and took the mech pilots into custody.

They restrained the norms that acted as support personnel in place because they held no value. Taking them along burdened the Vandals more than the Vesians, and they didn't feel like killing them after they magnanimously surrendered.

Ves got the sense that the Vandals weren't above killing their prisoners, but only if the Vesians pissed them off in some way. In that regard, the Vesians manning the lunar fortress did their duty but nothing more.

The Vandals took slightly more than two hours to strip down the lunar fortress. They retrieved most of what they could easily salvage, but hadn't managed to clean the fortress out entirely due to lack of time and lifting power.

They did leave a parting gift as the last mechs boarded the combat carriers and lifted off from the surface. Several portions of the fortress blew up, causing almost every section to collapse except for the areas which held the prisoners. It would take a significant amount of effort to bring the fortress back to strength after all of the destruction.

With the moons taken out of consideration, if only nominally, Major Verle turned his attention to the planet that held most of the star system's riches. Detemen IV, the fourth planet from the binary suns.

At the major's orders, the combat carriers formed up and moved into a lower orbit over the bountiful temperate planet. Much of its cities burned, but from high up the planet still resembled a jewel.

The attacks on the moons only served as their appetizers. Making landfall on Detemen IV and completing their subsequent objectives would be the main course. They gathered as much information as they could about Detemen IV and its local forces, but the rebels who provided most of their intelligence had been proven wrong several times before.

It was too easy to hide any number of assets on a planet. Even as the Vandal combat carriers turned their sensors towards the planet and attempted to scan the underground layers, they failed to turn up any results.

The Vesians either hid their assets well, or they really hadn't stationed any hidden forces on the planet.

"Don't get complacent, Ves." Alloc whispered to him. "What comes up next will be our real test. Urban combat is always messy. Depending on how much the locals can organize themselves, we can have a real fight on our hands. They still collectively outnumber us."

As much as that fact concerned Ves, the chances that they would unite in a common defense was low. That would mean submitting themselves to a single leader. Short of Lord Javier, no one possessed enough clout to unite the local forces.

"I've never been through a raid from the perspective of the raiders."

"This is more than a simple raid, Ves. We've established many objectives, but our main goals are to rob enough to make our losses worth it and to root out

Lord Javier from whatever hole he's crawled into. That's going to be difficult to complete in a very short timespan."

Ves thought that they had made a lot of haste, but evidently Alloc thought otherwise. With time pressing on their backs, they couldn't afford to delay their steps. The Vandals readied themselves to be deployed. The combat carriers split in two. Those that carried spaceborn mechs would remain in orbit while those that carried landbound mechs descended to the surface.

A tense moment ensued as some of the combat carriers made the risky action of descending into hostile territory. Though the rioting and the anarchy caused the planet to be thrown into confusion, that didn't mean that every local lost their minds. A counterattack could come at any moment.

While the combat carriers made the drop, Ves and Alloc already started analyzing the data that the rebels constantly poured in. They captured a lot of footage of mechs stomping around. Many influences held back some strength, and if not for all the strife, they never would have pulled out their reserve forces.

It was the job of the mech designers to analyze each model spotted in the wild and give out a cursory evaluation of their strength. With hundreds of different mech models spotted on the surface, the pair would have succumbed from all of the work, but luckily they didn't work alone. Other mech designers assigned to other ships did their part as well, thereby massively speeding up the identification and classification process.

Ves had never analyzed so many different mech models in such a short amount of time. The effort strained him somewhat and he made a lot of mistakes. Yet each time he fell, he picked himself up again and learned how to do better. He became increasingly proficient in spotting the strengths and weaknesses of mechs merely from spotty footage.

Besides their propensity for missiles, the Vesians on Detemen IV also leaned towards bestial mechs. These animal-shaped mechs took the place of melee mechs mostly as they all focused on closing in the distance with their four limbs and savage their opponents with claws and perhaps teeth.

"House Eneqqin is very partial to bestial mechs." Alloc quickly explained. "They're famous for fielding the Imodris Duchy's premiere bestial mech regiments. Most of them are sent to the frontlines, though, so we won't meet those elites on the field today."

So that explained it. House Eneqqin's rich tradition in working with bestial mechs helped compensate for the increased difficulty in mastering those types of mechs. Human mech pilots adjusted best when they piloted humanoid mech models.

There had always been sceptics who claimed that the human form was not always the most conducive form for combat. They derisively dismissed the bipedal human form and their dependance on tools as inefficiencies. Mech designers who adhered to this school of thought instead sought to develop alternatives based on animals and aliens.

The so-called bestial supremacy movement was a powerful strain within the galactic mech industry, but their grip in the Komodo Star Sector was fairly weak. The main advantages of bestial mechs was that they provided a lot of variety. The downsides to using them was it took a substantial amount of effort to train them with different animal forms.

That made animal-shaped mechs rather rare in the resource-starved galactic rim.

Pretty much every mech designers in the galactic rim fell into the humanoid supremacy movement, including Ves.

In practice, no one in the Bright Republic paid attention to these doctrinal and ideological disputes. Perhaps closer to the center of the galaxy, mech designers from different camps would confront each other and even initiated design duels to prove their point, but Ves found all of it rather silly.

"Those bestial mechs are geared for standing battles. They're not the hit-and-run types."

Ves studied the models seen in the wild and quietly agreed. These tiger and wolf-shaped mechs possessed a lot of bulk, putting them well in the upper range of the medium weight class. This gifted them with a hefty charge and powerful attacks but slow attacks up close, but it didn't do their speed and agility any good.

Nonetheless, due to their form, they were just a notch faster and more agile than humanoid mechs that weighed the same. Their four limbs provided them with a lot more stability as they didn't have to worry about tipping over as much.

The downside of course was that they couldn't make use of external equipment such as swords and rifles. They went into battle with the weapons already fixed into their frames.

Fighting them would be a nightmare on land, but aerial mechs should make quick work of them. Unfortunately, the Vandals weren't very strong in the air. They focused primary on spaceborn mechs and diverted some of their efforts on building up a force of landbound mechs by necessity.

Perhaps some spaceborn mechs would accompany the landbound mechs on the ground, but Ves couldn't see a fragile machine like the Inheritor ever doing so. He was familiar enough with its design to realize that the Inheritors would get massively slowed down when put under the influence of gravity.

As Ves continued to analyze mechs, a sudden change occurred just as the combat carriers heading to the surface touched land. A large number of heat signatures and alarms blared over the consoles of the specialists.

"Detecting active scanning from seventeen different locations from the surface! Our ships are being painted, sir!"

"What?! Plot those locations on the map right now!"

The central projector which displayed Detemen IV lit up with seventeen different points strewn about in random locations in the wilderness.

"Sir, detecting mass missile launches from eight other locations on Detemen IV and the second moon!"

More points lit up. This time, several trails flew up from these locations. Both in front and in their rear, the Vandal fleet faced an incoming surge of Vesian missiles.

No doubt whoever was in charge had been holding them back until the Vandals landed half their combat carriers. The Akkara mechs that served as their point defense would have been a significant help in shooting down the missiles. Now it was too late to recall the landed ships. The missiles traveled too fast for them to catch up.

Though Major Verle and the fleet in orbit had plenty of time to meet the incoming missiles, that hardly served as a consolation to them due to the sheer size of the missile salvo.

"What is the current count?"

"Reporting, an estimated number of forty-three thousand missiles have launched from Detemen IV. Fifteen-thousand missiles coming inbound from the second moon."

"Sensors have detected a second salvo!"

The mood in the command center plummeted at this point. Dealing with almost sixty thousand missiles was already a challenge. Dealing with twice as much would strain their defenses until they broke.

The news was already bad enough, but what came next was worse.

"A third salvo of missiles have launched from Detemen IV!"

"What about the launch sites on the second?"

"No activity detected! By all accounts, the crew of those sites have evacuated."

The third salvo looked a little more ragged. Evidently, the Vesians had thrown whatever they had left at the Vandal fleet up in orbit.

A total of 150,000 missiles headed in their direction. To a mech regiment that favored melee mechs over ranged mechs, this was an absolute disaster.

"Tell me of their makeup, now!" Major Verle bellowed.

Alloc and Ves already started to work on that as soon as the Vandals detected the missile launches. Eventually, they both came to the conclusion that only two types of missile had been launched.

"The missiles comprise of two different types." Alloc answered. "The missiles launched from the surface all consists of the Heavensfall HVA-535, a standard Vesian surface-to-space shipkiller missile type. They're characterized by their extremely powerful propulsion that lets them escape the gravity well of a terrestrial planet and build up a significant amount of velocity. Their payloads are largely explosive or kinetic depending on the variant, which we haven't been able to determine as of yet, sir."

"Then get on that as soon as possible! What of the other type?"

Since Ves analyzed those missiles, it was his turn to answer the major. "The hidden lunar sites have launched two salvos of XX-REX Mark 54-H missiles.

The XX-REX type missiles are characterised by their high explosive payloads, and the H variant of the Mark 54's denote the heaviest version of this type of missiles, so they pack an even greater punch."

They both relayed the exact numbers to Major Verle's terminal, who studied the data with increasing alarm.

The waves of missiles from the surface of Detemen IV needed to fight against gravity to reach the orbiting Vandal ships, so they generally didn't have too much left by the time they reached their targets. The sheer amount of missiles made up for their relative weakness in this area.

As for the XX-REX missiles launched from the second moon, they came in much fewer numbers, but a combat carrier that got hit in the right sections would certainly crack apart despite their superior armor coverage. The amount of damage they could deal already approached the level of torpedoes.

In short, they were screwed from both the front and the rear.

Chapter 462 Vesian Welcome

Both the Heavensfall and the XX-REX missiles represent specific types of military ordnance. Compared to the missiles used by mercs and gangs, the missiles used by the Mech legion possessed a lot of advantages.

They hit harder, their ECM wouldn't be as easy to fool and they accelerated significantly faster as well. Superior development only played a minor role in their performance. The true reason why the Flagrant Vandals feared these missiles was because they incorporated various amounts of exotics.

The use of expensive materials lay at the root of their performance. The Bright Republic generally shied away from such practices, as they considered lacing their missiles with junk exotics or low-grade exotics to be an absolute waste.

A missile launched from a tube would be a missile that could never be recovered. Once it detonated or got intercepted, the wreckage would be

strewn over a huge area, and in certain cases be blown by the wind on a planet or carried along their initial impulse in space.

It was safe to say that in cases like that, the expensive exotics would never be recovered.

Yet the Vesians didn't see it that way. Certainly, their active use of missiles cost a pretty penny, but they treated it as an investment. As long as they inflicted more damage on the enemy than what the missiles cost, then they came out ahead on a net basis.

That put the 150,000 missiles heading in their direction in a very ominous light. The resources put in their manufacture could have been used to acquire another combat carrier or two. If the Mech Corps faced the same equation, then they would have certainly gone for extra ships. Not so for the Vesians, who only thought in terms of how much damage they could inflict.

"Estimated casualties?" Major Verle asked a specialist in charge of simulations.

"A high possibility of three to five combat carriers sustaining heavy damage. One or two may even break apart."

The shipkiller missiles only targeted their ships. The Vesians might wish to target their transports and logistics ships as well because the Flagrant Vandals depended on them to make their way back home.

In any case, the incoming missiles needed to be dealt with. Major Verle stood up. "We've trained for this! Engage anti-missile countermeasures!"

With the Vesian propensity for launching mass missile swarms, the Mech Corps drilled relentlessly on how to take them out. Major Verle only needed to mention a few plans and issue a couple of instructions to make his ships and mechs adopt a defensive posture optimized against missiles.

Naturally, the Vesians didn't make it easy on their enemies to take their missiles out one by one. For one, they staggered their missiles in such a way that all 150,000 of them arrived near-simultaneously at their targets.

The first salvo traveled a little slower and adopted slightly arched trajectories, while the missiles behind them took a more direct approach and burned a little faster. Over time, the distances would diminish until they formed a combined volley of apocalyptic proportions.

The Flagrant Vandals much preferred the missiles to pour in to them one by one. This way, they could focus their full defensive envelope on a couple of missiles at once and take them out before the next one arrived. Sadly, no one with a brain would program their missiles to trickle in this way unless it served a special purpose.

The key to taking out so many missiles coming at them at once was to take potshots of them at extreme range.

"Launch counter-missiles!"

A handful of missileers among the Vandals launched their own missiles. The salvo released by them only numbered just above ten-thousand, an absolutely pathetic amount compared to what the Vesians threw at them. Hopefully, at least half of them would score a hit at the incoming Vesian missiles.

"Lasers, fire at will!"

Every laser-wielding mech in the mech regiment aimed their guns and fired far off into the distance. At this point, not a single mech pilot would be able to spot the missiles with the naked eye. They entrusted the aiming of their weapons entirely to their targeting systems, which all networked back to the powerful processors aboard the combat carriers.

One of the biggest advantages of laser beams over kinetic weapons was that they traveled at the speed of light and that their range was potentially enormous in the emptiness of space.

In practice, space wasn't completely empty, and the laser beams also tended to become defocused across huge distances. In addition, although the lasers traveled really fast, the missiles didn't travel in a straight line either.

The Vesian missiles poured a lot of research into improving their capability to dodge extreme-range laser fire. Small boosters embedded along their structure pushed the missiles left and right, up and down and even back and forth.

Extremely sophisticated algorithms governed this behavior, and unless the Mech Corps cracked the code, the Vandals wouldn't be able to predict their dodging patterns.

Both the Heavensfall and the XX-REX missiles happened to be the one of the newer types of missiles introduced by the Mech Legion in the last couple of years. That meant that the Vandals practically faced them for the first time.

Hundreds of mechs kept firing their lasers off in the distance. They focused on the low-volume XX-REX missiles launched from the second moon because they were bigger and heavier than the Heavensfall missiles. This made them a bit more resilient, but it also made them a lot easier to hit.

Dozens of missiles got shot down as the mechs scored occasional lucky hits. The hit rate slowly increased as the missiles neared the Vandal ships, but it all went far too slow for their tastes. The extreme range along with the devilishly clever dodging patterns made each attempt to take them down a complete gamble.

In situations like this, neither of the mech designers played much of a role. Major Verle turned to others who studied Vesian missiles as their life's work.

What Ves and Alloc knew about missiles wasn't very much, though Alloc at least tried to be helpful by trying to hack them in some way.

Good luck with that. The Vesians obsessed about having their missiles turn against them, so they employed many convoluted methods in order to prevent such an occurrence. In general, the Mech Corps only managed to crack lastgen missile models. Anything newer than that was pretty much a black box in their regard.

Many minutes passed by as the lasers took their toll on the missile salvos. Mechs that wielded projectile-based weapons stood by and waited for the missiles to come close before unleashing their own storm of fire.

Since their projectiles traveled much slower than the speed of light, it didn't make sense to fire them right now. The missiles saw the incoming projectiles coming and would have ages of time to adjust their trajectory and move out of the way.

Thousands more missiles died. Many expensive XX-REXX missiles blew apart as they got struck. Their payloads affected nothing but empty space. Yet the Vesians wouldn't consider their interception to be a waste. As long as they preoccupied the Vandals and prevented other missiles from being taken out, the XX-REXX missiles still served their purpose.

After a long while, the missiles finally entered the longest effective range of the Vandal projectile mechs. A huge volume of fire erupted from the mechs that had held their fear and indignation back. Now, they could finally unleash their pent-up frustration at the majestic cloud of missiles.

Thousands more missiles died each second. Ballistic weapons held a huge advantage in that they didn't generate as much heat. As long as their ammo lasted, the mechs could fire their rifles and cannons as much as they wished.

The Akkara heavy cannoneers pretty much stole the show at this point. Though they had already started firing their laser cannons at the start, once they unleashed their explosive shells, it was as if hell descended on the missiles.

Of course, the Vesians didn't pack the missiles close enough for multiple of them to be taken out by a single explosion. Still, the wide-area detonations made it easy to guarantee a kill.

The missile waves halved in numbers, with most of the XX-REX missiles taken out at this point. Yet that still left an abundance of Heavensfall missiles with very little time left to take them out as well.

Laser-wielding mechs kept firing their weapons regardless of the risks. Their mechs and weapons overheated in rapid tempo. Some mechs employed emergency coolant and other desperate measures to stave off a shutdown. They would rather fry their mechs than let a combat carrier go down.

In the meantime, every serviceman aboard the combat carriers buttoned down their gear and prepared for possible impact. In the Stubby Growler's command center, chairs shook as strange components ejected from underneath and flew to encompass everyone's bodies.

Everyone wore military-grade hazard suits now. They were rated to survive explosions, extreme temperature fluctuations and flying shrapnel, though only up to a certain point. They couldn't match full-blown exo-skeleton suits in toughness, but they made up for it in flexibility and several systems that enhanced their survival, such as water and oxygen recycling systems.

"I've heard stories about what the Vesians are willing to throw at us when it comes down to it." Alloc said in a prayer-like tone. Underneath his hazard suit, his eyes narrowed into slits. "It scares me, but also excites me in a way."

"I feel the same way, sir." Ves quietly said.

The diminishing missile salvos still contained many thousands of missiles. It was easy to mistake the incoming wave as a natural disaster to which no single person could resist.

Mechs shorted out as their most fragile components melted down. Weapons blew apart as the heat and stress put on them pushed them past their limits. The combat carriers huddled somewhat together and protected the vital logistical ships in the center of their formation.

The non-combat resource processing and fabrication ships possessed virtually no armor that could withstand the Heavensfall missiles. They had to be protected at all cost because the Vandals depended on the supplies they produced to operate so far behind enemy lines.

"Deploy final countermeasures!"

Chaff, sensor-blocking particles and more ejected from the combat carriers at the last instant. The ships ejected them at the last seconds in order to give the missiles as little time to adjust.

At the very end of their journey, the final Heavensfall missiles only numbered in the low thousands. Many of them got fooled by the emergency countermeasures deployed at the last moments. More of them got shot down by the Akkara heavy cannons that occupied the bunkers embedded into the ships.

Yet that still left less than a hundred surviving missiles. Out of the 150,000 that the Vesians started with, the tiny sum sounded pathetic.

It was not.

For some reason, the missiles all received an update on their targeting priorities in their final seconds of life. They clustered closer to each other as they converged on a handful of combat carriers.

"They're targeting our command ships!"

"The Stubby Growler is being pinged by twenty-seven missiles!"

"BRACE FOR IMPACT!"

Ves could barely hold on to his seat as it expanded and enveloped him in a huge crash ball. Everyone aboard the Stubby Growler became enveloped in these crash balls as well.

BOOOOM!

BOOOOM!

BOOOOM!

They certainly needed the extra protection as the Stubby Growler shook and shuddered violently over a span of a couple of seconds. A combination of kinetic and explosive missiles overwhelmed her armor and wreaked havoc inside. Entire sections of the combat carrier lurched away from her hull and flung off into space!

Many compartments became exposed to space, spilling their contents out or exposing the interior with destructive blasts.

Sometimes, the crash balls endured the impact and heat, and other times they cracked open. Even if they seemed intact, some of their occupants broke every bone in their bodies and died on impact.

From the lowest spacers to the highest officers, no one could escape the fury of the Vesian missiles!

Chapter 463 Heavensfall

Against the fury of so many missiles bearing down on her, the Stubby Growler simply ceased to exist. Fragments of the former ship slung in every direction, and the final missile blast even cracked open the command center's containment shell, flinging the crash balls loose and out into space.

Some of the white balls hit other debris. They either bounced in another direction or cracked apart, which spilled its occupants. Those that strayed too close from residual blasts, extreme radioactive materials and flinging shrapnel could count their prayers.

One crash ball happened to escape largely unscathed. Ves curled himself up in a fetal position inside his ball and kept his eyes on the HUD projected by his helmet.

He didn't have the time to feel sorry about the Stubby Growler and the handful of other combat carriers that got hit. The final explosions launched his crash ball with a hefty push. It flew away away far too fast for anyone to retrieve it amid the chaotic aftermath of the missile impacts!

The takedown of the carriers which held the established leaders of the Vandal detachment threw the survivors into temporary confusion. Protocols quickly came into being and the surviving mech officer with the highest seniority quickly asserted his authority.

"Damage control teams, assist the damaged carriers! Rescue teams, go out and recover our men! Mechs, replenish ammunition and cool down, we need you up and running in case the Vesians send a follow-up attack!"

A second response such as launching mechs or another wave of missiles was unlikely. The Vesians likely blew their entire reserves at that single instant in order to maximize their kill potential. So far, despite the costs, they definitely scored ahead of the Flagrant Vandals.

"How much losses have we sustained so far?"

"Reporting, two combat carriers lost, including Major Verle's Stubby Growler. Three more carriers sustained heavy damage. Eleven only suffered negligible damage. Casualties are estimated to be around seven-thousand Vandals, spread disproportionately among the lost and heavily damaged carriers."

"Our logistical ships?"

"No damage reported other than scratches from incidental impacts against floating debris. They're safe and sound."

A small load lifted off their chests. Losing those combat carriers hurt a lot and set the Vandals back enormously, but with the logistical ships intact they could still carry the survivors home.

The newly-elevated commanding officer stared out at the projection that showed the chaotic Vandal ships converging back together. "The Vesians had their fun. Now it's our turn to dish back the hurt."

All of this happened far away from Ves. As rescue mechs and shuttles flew out to help those nearest to their positions, the crash balls and loose-flying hazard suits kept spreading out in every direction with rapid speed.

Each and every one of them suffered a violent push that flung them far too much for the rescue teams to reach them quickly. They might have been able to make it to them if they flew towards them at their best speed, but the mechs and shuttles priorities recovering the nearest survivors.

For most, who got rescued first didn't matter too much. However, a small portion of hazard suits and crash balls had been thrown in the direction of Detemen IV. The planet exerted a light but ever-present gravity that still drew on the approaching objects.

Some would sheer past and bend their trajectories. Others would slingshot away at a sharper angle like how a stone attached to a string could be launched away by employing Detemen IV's gravity as centrifugal force.

As for a small portion of unlucky survivors, they traveled almost straight towards Detemen IV at such an angle that it would be impossible for them to skate past.

Basically, they were on course for planetary entry, wrapped in shells that might or might not survive the incredible amounts of heat generated from the friction of their breach into the atmosphere.

Inside one particular crash ball, Ves tried to stretch his body but couldn't do anything due to the strong padding that surrounded his hazard suit. With hardly any room to move, Ves focused his full attention to the head-up display projected by his helmet. It interfaced with the electronics in the crash ball, allowing him a glimpse of what happened outside.

Its basic systems managed to determine that there was a really big planet in its path. It even managed to call up a pre-installed map of the planet, and trace out the crash ball's approximate trajectory.

If nothing changed, the ball would likely crash in the middle of an ocean.

"That's not good. I'll either be left alone for weeks or be taken prisoner by the Vesians."

With the Vandals unlikely to rescue him before his crash ball started its descent, Ves intended to rely on his own. He couldn't do anything in the middle of the ocean.

He needed to change course.

"Crash ball! Set destination to Neron City!"

[ADJUSTING COURSE.]

Tiny boosters affixed to the exterior of the crash ball spurted out tiny jets. This caused it to spin and alter its trajectory. Ves saw that it adopted a shallower angle in order to arc its ultimate end point away from the ocean and closer to the capital city of Detemen IV.

[COURSE CHANGE COMPLETED. RESERVE FUEL: 27 PERCENT REMAINING.]

The crash seat even allowed Ves to finetune his landing point, though the crash ball didn't make any guarantees. Ves only took a moment to select a mech workshop district in the outskirts of Neron City.

As a mech designer, Ves fared best when surrounded by mechs or other machines. Though it was extremely risky to mix with the local Vesians in one of the most densely-populated cities of Detemen IV, it beat landing in complete wilderness.

"Without anyone watching my back, I only have my skills and my Amastendira to rely on."

While he could have gone for the much more massive manufacturing complexes located nearby, Ves thought it would be too risky to sneak inside those places. From what Ves had gathered during his stint at the Stubby Growler's command center, most of those complexes still enjoyed protection from their company forces.

And since these prosperous manufacturing complexes attracted a lot of attention, any place that fell would be overrun with rioters and robbers. That was not the kind of people that Ves wanted to mix with. He merely wanted to scrounge some machines together in order to protect himself long enough for the Flagrant Vandals forces on the ground could pick him up.

The crash ball started to encounter an increasing amount of air. As a terraformed planet, Detemen IV contained nearly the exact same atmosphere as Old Earth. Therefore, the crash began to be slowed down by drag but also started heating up because of that.

The heat began to scorch the white surface of the ball, but the emergency device had been built to withstand just these kind of situations. Almost every crash ball flung to the planet endured the heat generated by friction.

Some of the poor sods in the hazard suits had it worse. As much as the hazard suits had been designed to endure all manner of damage, in the end they weren't as robust as full exo-skeleton suits.

The main issue with the suits was that it couldn't deal with the heat. Everyone that fell towards the planet without a crash ball started heating up inside their suits. Some of the older units based on outdated hazard suit designs even failed as certain fragile components suddenly broke under all of the stress.

Dozens of people died this way, burnt to a crisp from inside-out.

Ves had no time to mourn for the fallen. His crash ball shook and shuddered so violently that he could hardly read his helmet's HUD. The figures and numbers kept shaking all over in front of his eyes.

"Damnit! The Vandals cheaped out on the hazard suits!"

At least they had the decency to employ decent crash balls. None of the balls so far had failed under the stress, though the handful of units that got damaged by flying debris started to shake a little harder.

Nevertheless, Ves started to feel mildly uncomfortable as some of the heat outside started to bleed into the interior. Pressed on all sides by cushioning materials and enclosed in a hazard suit that couldn't move, Ves started to feel very claustrophobic. The shaking and the knowledge that the descent could go wrong at any moment also failed to reassure his concerns.

"Note to self: invest in proper emergency equipment!"

The pressure also started to bore into his body, but at least Ves had it better than most. The g-force did almost nothing to his strengthened body, and the miniature inertial compensators bled off some of it when it began to exceed a certain amount.

Still, everything depended on the continued operation of a handful of critical systems. It was far too fragile to his tastes.

Ves felt like he returned right back to the Glowing Planet or Groening IV. Just like before, Ves fell into a circumstance where everything went out of control and where his actions couldn't change the outcome at all. He hated feeling helpless like a newborn lamb.

"This is far too crazy!"

Mech designers shouldn't even be exposed to direct combat. Ves thought he had escaped such a fate by digging himself out of the pit filled with low-ranked mech designers, but of all the mech regiments he could end up with, he got assigned to one of the few that didn't maintain a permanent base.

Ves always thought the Vandals held ulterior motives in keeping all of their assets mobile. Maintaining a safe and secure base on a planet far away from the frontlines might offer safe harbor to the Vandals, but it also tied them down.

By now, his crash ball had gone through the worst part of the descent. The shaking subsided and the speed of the ball's descent had slowed down to a more controllable and manageable state.

This finally reassured him a little. "At least not everything has gone wrong."

One downside of entering atmosphere was that the crash ball lost contact with its fellow. From what he gathered until the connections broke, most of the crash balls had the same idea as he did and tried to converge around Neron City or one of the other major cities within their fuel allowance.

Last he counted, around fifty or so or so crash balls specifically directed their course towards the capital city, but they all chose different districts to land on. Some even wanted to go fall directly towards the landing site of Vandal combat carriers that carried landbound mechs to the ground.

Such an action was exceedingly risky because the Vesians on the ground weren't vegetables.

Neron City started coming into view.

Several areas in and around Neron City started to be lit up as hidden turrets emerged from their underground enclosures and targeted the descending crash balls. Most of the anti-air turrets clustered around the palace and other important government buildings situated downtown. The manufacturing complexes also contributed some of their anti-air turrets or mechs into taking down the errant crash balls.

The districts adjacent to the area where the Vandals established their beachheads hosted plenty of turrets as well.

Any Vandal the Vesians took out now would be one Vandal they didn't have to face on the battlefield.

"Those bastards! Next time, we better not take any prisoners!" Ves cursed as he programmed a last minute course change to take him further away from the center of Neron City.

[COURSE CHANGE INTERRUPTED. RESERVE FUEL: 0 PERCENT REMAINING.]

His ball expended its last remaining available reserve of fuel, and it was barely enough to get him to the furthest edge of the mech workshop district.

Fortunately, the district looked a little rundown and held nothing of importance, so the Vesians didn't bother posting a turret in this area.

As his crash ball neared the surface of Neron City, his crash ball expended the final remaining bits of fuel and power it reserved to make a safe landing. A powerful antigrav module came to life, allowing the final landing boosters to slow down its fall to a more controllable descent.

For a moment, Ves felt as if he was weightless.

The next, a firm thud pushed him against the cushions as his crash ball embedded itself into an abandoned and overgrown park.

The ball finally fell apart after that. Ves shakingly emerged from the remnants of the broken ball and shook his hazard suit to get some life back into his limbs.

"So this is Neron City."

The twin suns just started to fall under the horizon. Nevertheless, plenty of flames lit up the darkening skies in the distance. Weapons fire and mechs clashing against each other could be heard from the distance.

The entire planet fell into turmoil, and as Lord Javier's seat of power, Neron City bled the most.

Ves almost felt sorry for the citizens, but he quickly reminded himself that he wasn't one of them. "The entire planet is my enemy."

Chapter 464 Enemy of the Entire Plane

The mech workshop district sat in the furthest reaches from the center of the city. It held a very poor location, being far away from the spaceport and the well-developed infrastructure that supported the manufacturing complexes on the other side of Neron City.

The only thing the district had going for was that beginning mech designers could easily rent a workshop for a pittance. They could also hire cheap manpower from the slums in the neighboring cities, though that also caused this part of town to be ridden with petty gangs and crime.

A gang member happened to spot a crash ball landing in the abandoned park. He didn't recognize the object and only thought it might be some space debris separated from a ship.

"Ol' lucky me! Anything that can survive entry is bound to fetch a few hundred sovbies."

The Vesia Kingdom utilized the nova sovereigns as their state-wide currency. Almost everyone referred to them as sovbies, and they held a value roughly twenty-five percent weaker than a bright credit.

To an average bottom feeder, a few hundred sovbies was more than enough to live on for a month or two. The gang member eagerly climbed over the rusted fence and entered the overgrown park. He pushed his way past the wild bushes and long grasses until he finally reached a small clearing with a lot of cooling debris.

"Treasure!" The man's eyes lit up and he practically threw himself on his knees to touch a piece, only to scald his hand from the residual heat of the exterior part. "Hot hot hot!"

After blowing his fingers, the man turned his attention back to the pieces and smiled. "So much stuff! Maybe it'll be enough to get a thousand sovbies!"

He had never owned so much money in a single instant. Everything went to pay for food, shelter and the occasional stimulants. Anytime he held more than a hundred sovbies, the money just seemed to slip through his fingers the next day.

As the man dreamt of what he would do with all of that wealth, his thoughts flew away when a thin, surgical laser beam pierced his head.

For a second, the dead gang member appeared to struggle with what had happened to him. The next, his body fell flat to the debris-strewn soil as his brain had completely given up the ghost.

Ves in his hazard suit emerged from behind a tree trunk with his Amastendira extended cautiously towards the corpse. The gang member looked dead, but

was that truly so? He slowly inched forward until he was able to stretch out his armored foot and bump the motionless corpse.

After making sure the fellow was dead, Ves sighed in relief and held the man by his neck and quickly dragged him away. The landing site of his crash ball was a conspicuous spot and his landing here might have attracted someone else's attention.

After reaching a thickly-grow portion of the park, Ves let down his guard and studied the corpse. Despite the awful damage done to the head, the poor chap's remains hadn't spilled onto the rest of his body, which was exactly what Ves intended.

He stared at the man's cheap mass-produced clothes and compared them to his nearly spotless green mech designer uniform underneath his hazard suit.

The problem with his outfit was that it carried a couple of emblems and other trappings that marked him out as a mech designer in service to the Mech Corps. If Ves dared to stroll through Neron City's anarchy-infested streets with these clothes, he'd be liable to get mobbed by hateful citizens who decried the disastrous invasion of the Flagrant Vandals.

"Sorry buddy. I need your clothes."

Ves disengaged from his bulky hazard suit and shed his mech designer uniform. Then, he proceeded to strip the corpse and draped them to his own bare body. Their stature fortunately matched somewhat, so Ves didn't feel uncomfortable by their fit.

He also took the man's cheap comm from his wrist, but Ves couldn't manage to get past the security check. Alloc or Melkor would have been able to hack into it, but Ves had never learned how to hack a comm without assistance. He didn't specialize in this field.

"Great. I'm going to need to get my hands on an unsecured comm."

His ultimate goal would be to return to the Vandal fleet up in space. Despite the destruction of a handful of ships, the Vandals should still be aiming to continue their operation. They invested too much resources to make this daring assault, and the loss of a handful of extremely expensive combat carriers only spurred them on. They needed to loot enough riches to compensate for their substantial losses.

"The only problem is that they've landed on the far side of the manufacturing complexes."

The Flagrant Vandals chose to land outside the city's perimeters, but close to the district which held all of the major industrial complexes. It was obvious to everyone what the Vandals intended. Half-organized mech units of House Eneqqin's household troops had already deployed a substantial amount of mechs to that district, but as far as Ves was aware of, their numbers couldn't match the invading Vandals.

Making his way through Neron City's various districts while bypassing rioters and loyalists sounded very daunting to Ves. However, he would rather take his chances than to sit tight and wait for rescue that might never come.

With his new clothes, at least he wouldn't be mistaken as an enemy by the locals. With potentially the entire planet as his enemy, Ves could ill afford to be known as a stray Brighter who arrived from the stars.

After fiddling but failing to accomplish anything with the comm, he threw it on the ground next to his discarded clothes, his hazard suit and a stripped corpse. Ves extended the barrel of his Amastendira yet again and set it on a wider angle at a higher power setting.

VRUUSH!

As he fired the pistol at the pile on the ground, the wider beam caused the entire mess to melt or burn apart. A huge sizzle escaped from the body as a

lot of its moisture evaporated into disgusting steam. Ves leaned away from the conflagration and tried to avoid breathing in the foul air.

The hazard suit took longest to melt down. It had been designed to withstand heat to some extent, but in the end it couldn't resist the vast power of his Amastendira.

Once the suit turned into a molten puddle of alloys and composites, Ves released his finger off the trigger and shoved the weapon back into his intangible Inventory.

"That takes care of that."

Ves felt oddly guilty about killing the Vesian. He had been responsible for the deaths of several people, either directly or indirectly as was the case with supplying others with his mechs. Ves did not lose any sleep over this responsibility, but the act of killing another human being in person oddly discomforted him in the back of his mind.

He could have found another solution, such as breaking in one of the nearby structures or workshops and scavenge some clothing from there. He could have knocked the fellow out with a hefty bump on the head and stripped him without killing the lad.

"I can't obsess over these what-ifs. Not with my life at stake."

He quickly got over his dilemma and resolved himself to escape from this planet. Ves was no saint, and he cared nothing for the lives of the people who lived on Detemen IV. Killing them was distasteful, but if it kept him alive, he would do whatever was necessary.

Ves moved from the park as casually as possible. He tried out various postures before settling for a slightly slouched one that mimicked the sleazy gang member that he turned into ashes.

The trouble was that it would be difficult to pass for a genuine local. Ves obtained no training in this regard, and the differences between Vesians and Brighters was large enough that one would instantly recognize the other as soon as they opened their mouths.

Ves wouldn't be able to mimic the two defining cultural traits of a Vesian. First, their society was a lot more hierarchical, and even the commoners themselves split up their social class into several layers.

Second, the Vesians adopted a local accent that was slightly different from the Republic. They also used different idioms and word choices in some cases. Ves couldn't mimic the Vesian voice at all, let alone the Detemen accent which was another subset of the Vesian accent.

He actually didn't know too much about these differences, but his recent interactions with Iris taught him a lot more about the Vesians than he wanted to. It turned out that the things he learned about the Vesians might prove very helpful in his current predicament.

Ves moved in the direction of his destination, bringing him closer to the city proper. This far out, the streets only held a few workshops, and none of them looked to have been used in the past several years.

"Times are tough for them as well, huh?"

The Vesians must have drafted much of their bottom feeder mech designers as well. This led to many empty and abandoned mech workshops. Debt collectors, scavengers and thieves looted them empty. The scavengers even took away near-worthless objects such as towels or cutlery.

"Empty."

"Empty."

Empty."

Practically everyone looking to make a quick sovvie had picked the entire street of workshops clean. Ves wouldn't be able to cobble up anything together with what little they left behind. He needed to go deeper into the district and break into a proper workshop.

Though entering deeper into Neron City scared him, Ves urgently needed to make something. He didn't forget that the Vandals only allotted four days at most for their assault on Detemen IV. Ves needed to reach the Vandal beach head on the other side of the city in order to get away from his hellhole.

As Ves passed through several intersections, he met a couple of people on the streets. Most appeared to be tough guys looking to make some trouble. Ves kept his head down and tried to shuffle away as fast as possible from these types.

"Watch where you're going, bung-hole!"

Most people who looked at Ves stared at his dirt-encrusted clothes and dismissed him out of hand. They probably thought that Ves didn't own enough wealth to make it worthwhile for them to rob him. One burly man thought otherwise.

"Watcha looking at? You looking at me? You looking at me?!"

The thug went as far as grabbing the hem of the stolen shirt.

"Let go." Ves softly said.

"How about... no. What are you gonna do about it?"

"Nothing much, except this!"

BANG!

Ves instantly punched the thug's head with a sloppy hook. The incredible force behind the punch launched the Vesian across the street until he smacked against the wall of an abandoned workshop.

He felt something crunch with the punch, and he would bet that his accoster would never stand up again. He didn't feel bothered at that, as thugs weren't worth his time. Still, he attracted a lot of attention to himself. A few bystanders turned their gazes at him, prompting Ves to flee from this part of town in a quick jog.

A couple of minutes later, Ves arrived at a street that looked a little better than normal. A lot more thugs and gang members prowled the streets, but the workshops in this area looked like they were still in business, if only barely.

"This is more like it, though why are there so many people out on the streets?"

Ves shuffled forward and tried to act like he belonged. He made for a very poor actor, but the thugs weren't the most discerning people. They had other things in mind. Ves listened to their hushed conversations.

"They say the Vandal raid has Boss Nyerson all up in a tizzy. Why else would he call us out here out of the blue?"

"Can't blame him. I heard it's hell downtown. What is our planet coming to? I'm glad that we escaped most of that. I hope Boss Nyerson keeps it that way."

Soon enough, a beat-up low-flying aircar arrived from the distance. The car obviously feared being taken out by anti-air batteries, so the car flew as low to the ground without scraping its bottom. After a while, the aircar reached the largest group of thugs and plopped itself flat on the ground.

A door opened and revealed a tall and muscled brute. The man's scarred face turned into a grin.

"Boss Nyerson!"

Chapter 465 Lugnuts

"Boss! Are we doing it? Are we gonna smash the Salamanders?"

"We're doing nothing of the sorts!" The brutish man barked back. His response surprised everyone who gathered here. "You dolts! I didn't train my Lugnuts to go crazy at the first sign of panic! I feel ashamed you even suggest such a thing!"

"Yeah, but-but-but the rest of Dettie has gone crazy! Why shouldn't we celebrate as well?"

"They're only crazy because those damned rebels are riling everyone up. I don't tolerate any of their people in my territory, and I'm glad I did because it's as quiet as a mouse out here."

Most of the crowd still couldn't accept such an outcome. So far, they helplessly watched on as the news portals broadcasted complete anarchy from the interior of Neron City. They badly wanted to join the fun as the destructive revel spilled out to several districts, except for theirs which was too remote.

"Think about it." Boss Nyerson said and stretched his arms around the workshops lining the streets. "How much sovies do you think we earn for protecting these bunch of nerds? It's a lot, especially added over time."

"But if we can loot their workshops, we can make off with millions worth of sovies in fancy gear!"

"Stupid! How would we get rid of them? Do we even have the space to hide all of our loot before can sell them off to the black market? How will we be able to get rid of the tracking devices that they'll surely be hiding?"

The Lugnuts kept trying to weasel Boss Nyerson into letting them go wild, but the strongest of them all remained staunch in the face of temptation.

"Lemme ask you this, how long do you think the rebels and the Brighters will stay?"

That shut everyone up.

"Days. Weeks, maybe, but not months, and there's no chance they'll be here to stay. Once they finally leave, what will happen to the rest? I can tell you now that the Immies will come down with their mechs and investigators and scoop out any troublemaker who helped them out."

"We aren't helping the enemy! We just want to enjoy some of our dues, that's all."

"Don't try to fast talk me! I know what you're up to, and I say you're not getting any of that as long as I'm around!"

Ves listened from the outskirts of the loose crowd as Boss Nyerson blabbed on about his forty years of living on the streets and staying alive while all of his buddies overreached and met their ends. At the heart of it, Ves approved of his clear-headed approach.

Sadly, caution and calm wasn't very conducive for his purposes.

"I don't want to hear any trouble from you boys! We're going to patrol our turf and kick anyone out that even hints at trouble. It's boring work, but mark my words, the Immies will reward us well when they come to save us from the rebels and Brighters."

That sounded very bad for Ves. While he didn't know how far their territory spanned, chances were high the Lugnuts would notice his presence and approach him. Once they had him under their sights, it would be very difficult to stay unnoticed.

As Boss Nyerson started issuing out specific orders, Ves slowly shuffled backwards while he readied the Amastendira. The fancy laser pistol gleamed obnoxiously from the streetlights out in the dark. The weapon had been designed for a noble, not an infiltrator.

Despite the risks, Ves nevertheless took his time to aim the weapon. He might have a bit of practice firing the weapon, but his aim would still be wobbly this far back from his target.

Just as Boss Nyerson spotted the gleam of the pistol aimed at him, Ves fired his weapon. A bright golden beam slashed out and tore past the ear of the big guy.

"Damn! I missed!"

Nyerson's quick reflexes caused him to jump and roll to the side, but Ves wasn't finished yet. He kept his finger on the trigger and raked his laser beam across the street until it hit the fleeing gang leader, instantly boiling his flesh and ended his life.

"Boss!"

"Kill him!"

"Run!"

Everything happened so fast that the Lugnuts could hardly process the blatant murder. Some of the men with quicker wits pulled out their guns and started to pepper Ves with badly-aimed shots, but he already dove into an alleyway between two workshops, thereby cutting everyone's line of sight.

"After him!"

"No wait! It's too dangerous!"

Around a third of the men looked like they wanted to take revenge, but inwardly the golden laser beam astonished them all. The Lugnuts generally used the cheapest laser weapons they could get their hands on, and the beams on those rifles and pistols only lasted a couple milliseconds or so.

A laser beam that kept burning at so much power that they could still feel the heat from their skin was worth a lot more than what they collectively earned in years.

"Who killed the boss?"

"No idea, but I'm out of here!"

Some panicked, some stood paralyzed while some scratched their heads, trying to figure out what to do next.

"The assassin's probably a rebel. He probably didn't like Boss Nyerson's plan of staying put on our turf."

"So you say that the rebels kill the boss because he isn't dancing to their tune?"

"Yeah."

A lot of Lugnuts still stuck around. As much as they feared the laser, the assassin already made a getaway.

"Hey, should we do what the rebels want?"

"Whadda ya mean?"

"You know, since Boss Nyerson got killed for doing nothing, shouldn't we do the opposite instead?"

A brain lit up in their minds as they contemplated the idea. "The Boss thought it was a bad idea. It'll attract attention from the Immies when they finally come and lay down the law."

"Those troops from Imodris won't bother with small fry like us. They'll have to butcher half the planet if they want to punish all the rioters. C'mon, this is our chance! There's no guarantee the Immies will reward us if we do nothing, but

if we can make a quick score today, we'll be living like kings for the rest of our lives!"

This argument rapidly gained a lot of momentum. After a little bit of back-and-forth, the remnants of the Lugnuts quickly came to an agreement.

"LET'S SMASH THIS PLACE UP!"

It was as if they turned into barbarians. The Lugnuts might have acted meek in front of Boss Nyerson, but with nothing restraining them anymore, they didn't hesitate to let their inner beasts wild.

Laughter, screams and threats hung in the air as the occupants of the workshops tried and failed to resist the deluge of gang members. Word of their antics began to spread and all kinds of lowlives crawled out of the woodwork to join in the fun.

The sight of so many people throwing the workshops into chaos emboldened the cowards and the weak. They gained enough courage to join in on the looting, thereby throwing the entire territory of the Lugnuts into chaos.

Ves shook his head as he kept to the shadows. He stared emotionlessly as he saw the businesses being looted, set on fire or smashed in various conditions. As everyone busied themselves into taking what they wanted from the workshops that built all of those big mechs, Ves quietly snuck to Boss Nyerson's corpse, grabbed hold of the remnants and dragged it to the abandoned aircar.

None of the Lugnuts had attempted to loot their former boss, whether it was out of fear or respect, Ves didn't know. As Ves entered the aircar and slammed the door shut, he rifled through Nyerson's burned remains but found very little of value.

"A pistol, some data chips, a comm."

Ves had set his laser beam at a moderate power setting, but that was almost enough to burn most of Nyerson's possessions to a crisp. Ves didn't get anything he hoped for, causing him to sigh and throw the remains in the back seat of the aircar.

"Can I activate this car?"

Ves quickly explored the control panel of the car. He even bent down and detached a plate, allowing him to look at the insides of the car.

"Nothing."

Ves spotted nothing that he could use to take control. The aircar might look cheap and old, but Ves couldn't even bypass its antiquated security systems.

He needed to find another ride. "Time for plan B, I suppose."

Ves exited the useless aircar and ran along the streets, heading slowly but surely towards the center of the city. None of the rioting Lugnuts or lowlives spared a glance at him. For one, he was dressed as shabbily as them. Secondly, Ves didn't look like a person who held a lot of valuables.

This allowed him to reach what he suspected to be the edge of the Lugnuts territory. Beyond the intersection up ahead was another district of mech workshops that clearly looked like it had entered the advance state of rioting. A handful of wreckage formed a crude barrier that separated the two areas.

As ugly and awful as it looked, it formed an effective wall against rioters on foot. This insulated the Lugnuts from much of the trouble ahead.

Not a lot of Lugnuts had reached this area yet, but a handful of clever hooligans opted to start breaking down doors from here, far away from where most the Lugnuts let loose.

"The Lugnuts have finally done it."

"It was about time they did something. We've been waiting on the streets for half a day now."

They neared the door of a workshop and banged at it with their fists. "Open up! We're the tax collectors, and your taxes are due!"

A crackling speaker came to life. "Bugger off! I got nothing worth your time! Go loot the workshop down the street! He recently upgraded his assembly system, that's gotta be worth a lot!"

The troublemakers looked at each other and nodded. One of them held out a scuffed laser rifle and aimed it at the door before proceeding to pepper it with bursts of laser beams.

To its credit, the door held out against the heat. It would take a decent amount of time for the lasers to burn through.

"I'm telling you, open up, or you won't like it when we finally pry it open."

"You can go to hell! Don't come inside, I'm armed!"

The men laughed. "A nerd like you can hardly hurt a fly!"

As the men already started dreaming about how much loot they could make off from emptying out this workshop, Ves sneaked up behind the men and unceremoniously unleashed a nearly full-powered laser beam from his Amastendira. He raked the beam from left and right, which vaporized the abdomens of every looter gathered together.

Ves walked over the corpses with his pistol held out before reaching the door. He knocked at it once and spoke out calmly. "Open up this door, or I'm turning this gun on you."

"Hyiii!! Please don't shoot! I'll open it, I'll open it!"

A tone rang and locks disengaged. The door slid open, allowing Ves to enter the dingy interior of one of the shabbiest workshops that he had ever seen.

Ves realized midway throughout his journey that he wouldn't be able to access any of the machines in the workshops without the right credentials. His lack of equipment and means seriously limited his options. He urgently needed to gear up, and that meant he couldn't walk past the workshops without doing something.

Thus, he came up with a plan on the spot. Killing Boss Nyerson was a spur of the moment decision, but it succeeded in throwing his turf into chaos. With everyone thinking about scoring a lot of riches, an outsider like Ves would have much more room for maneuver.

It also put a lot of fear in the mech designers and workers that still occupied these workshops.

Ves looked around with care, wary for an unexpected ambush. The man on the other end of the line sounded frightened, but Ves couldn't help but shake the feeling that it might have been an act.

"Where are you? Come out!"

Chapter 466 Filkis

Ves stopped and started to think. What would a poor, impoverished mech designer rely on when he owned a dingy mech workshop in a remote district of Neron City? With thugs of all kind roaming the streets, he didn't believe a cowardly mech designer would roll over without a fight.

He looked around the long but narrow interior of the mech workshop. It had been built for the purpose, featuring strong ceramic walls that could withstand any industrial accidents, and from the abundant marks of age, plenty of mishaps had happened over the years in this humble building.

The mech designer who spoke over the speakers was probably the latest in a long line of owners.

Ves began to look around some more and studied the aged, rusted machinery and the haphazardly strewn tools. Even if the workshop was at such a poor state, this mech designer should have treated his gear with more respect. Leaving them out in the open for anyone to bump their feet onto the obstacles was a sign of an incredible level of sloppiness.

For a moment, Ves felt like an inspector who had been tasked with the unenviable job of evaluating the safety of this workspace environment. He only stepped through the front and already he could write an entire report on the violations he had seen.

"Where are you? Step out!"

No one responded. None of the speakers crackled to life to convey the high-pitched voice of the mech designer who occupied this dark and silent mech workshop.

Ves tried to put himself in the opposite man's situation again. What would he do against anyone who tried to invade his mech workshop when he was all alone?

"A mech designer operating a mech workshop by himself can rely on at least one thing... bots!"

Just as he realized this thought, a surge of bots hovered into the front hall. Over three-dozen bots of varying shapes and sizes haphazardly stormed over the Ves. The heavier bots wielded unfinished plates of mech armor while the smaller bots wielded a variety of clubs or shabby laser pistols.

Though shabby, such a chaotic group of bots would likely have been able to defeat the group of thugs that originally intended to break into this workshop. As far as ingenuity went, the mech designer came up with a decent plan.

Too bad he faced Ves.

Although the bots looked deadly, they were industrial bots, not war bots. They didn't excel in the battlefield, as evidenced by their fairly slow speed and the awful accuracy of their laser shots. Ves merely had to dive behind a corner in order to shield himself against the lasers.

Still, pathetic or not, Ves would certainly suffer if those bots came close and pressed him between several plates.

"I've got to take them out before they get close!"

He extended his Amastendira and set it at a fairly high power level. Just like before, he unleashed a thick, golden beam that hit the armor plating carried by the biggest bot.

Perhaps a regular laser weapon would have splashed uselessly against the mech-grade armor plate, but the Amastendira was an entire class of laser pistols in itself. The gun in itself had been designed to overcome weaker mechs, and its high-powered potency didn't disappoint.

The armor plate the bot carried succumbed remarkably quickly. Ves did not expect anything different, as he vaguely recognized it as one of the cheapest armor formulas available. He slashed the laser beam from left to right, causing the other improvised shield bots to split apart and burn on the spot.

"My bots! No!"

Ves could hear desperation, but not to the point of giving up. Those bots were very valuable and served a vital purpose in keeping this workshop running. The mech designer shouldn't keep risking his bots like this when his shield bots had all been taken out in a single hit.

What was he relying on?

Only a few seconds passed before Ves smelled something funny in the air. He sniffed and stretched out his tongue, only to taste something that resembled something rotten.

"Poison!"

His body had already started to heat up, a sign that it actively started to resist a poisonous element. Ves hadn't felt this warm since his body first transformed on Groening IV.

Back then, he could easily breathe the toxic air of a completely alien planet. A tiny bit of poison synthesized by an impoverished mech designer posed no threat to his health. His body always heated up according to the severity of the threat, and right now he barely felt warmer than his normal condition.

"Nice try, but poison won't work on me! Now stop your stupid shenanigans or I'll destroy all of your bots! This is my final warning! Surrender now, or I'll wreck all your stuff and try my luck at another workshop!"

A brief pause stretched after he delivered those words, but eventually Ves could hear the bots flying back from where they emerged.

"I give up! Please don't do anything! This workshop isn't mine, I rented it! I'll be in so much trouble if anything gets broken!"

After a short while, Ves reached the end of the structure and climbed some steps until he reached the control room where the mech designer governed the entire workshop. Ves carefully trained his Amastendira at the skinny thirty-something year old man who was undoubtedly the mech designer of this workshop.

"What's your name?"

"Filkis Kwan! Mister.. Can you please not point that gun at me?"

"Only if you prove you're unarmed."

Filkis emptied his pockets and removed his coat, leaving him in an oil-stained shirt and a pair of faded pants. Once Ves inspected the man and insured he didn't hide some holdout weapon in his underwear, Ves lowered the Amastendira, though he hadn't let down his guard yet.

"Well Filkis, if you do as I say, I'll be gone before you know. Disobey me, and I won't hesitate to flash-boil your entire head with my laser pistol. Understand?"

"Yes, yes, yes, I understand!" Filkis nodded so vigorously that it looked as if his head would bob off entirely.

"Turn on the command console and show me a status of this workshop. I want a list of all your assets and whatever stock you have in your inventory."

Filkis stared at Ves as if he was an alien. It took some time, but he finally realized something dreadful about Ves. "Your accent! You're no Dettie. You're a Brighter!"

"I am." Ves admitted without any compunction. The truth would have come out eventually. "Don't forget that I'm the one with the gun here, so you better do as I say."

Filkis nodded again and again before opening up the command console to Ves.

Once Ves browsed the lists, he became a little disappointed. Filkis was truly one of the lowest order of independent mech designers he ever had the pleasure to meet.

The 3D printer was from the earlier days of the last generation, and it had not aged particularly well after changing hands over a dozen times.

The assembly system looked a little better, but Ves had just destroyed all of the heaviest bots that were supposed to perform the most demanding duties.

All in all, the machinery would only be able to fabricate the most inferior bottom-tier mechs, and their quality wouldn't be much better than a wreck scavenged straight from a brutal battlefield.

Thus, it came to no surprise that Filkis didn't do a lot of business. His workshop stayed idle for weeks at a time, and his inventory contained so little stock that he was dependent on advance payments.

"You're one of the saddest excuses of a mech designer that I have ever seen." Ves commented, sparing no mercy in his words. "Frankly, it's a waste of time for you to rent this workshop and try and make it on your own. You'd have better luck if you enlisted in the Mech Legion or joined a scavenger fleet and made a living restoring broken mechs."

"I-I know.." Filkis bent his head. "The Mech Legion didn't want me, and I don't have the connections or qualifications to join another employer."

"Really? You're that bad?" Ves frowned. Even the most incompetent mech designer could still be employed as an overqualified mech technicians. There were no useless mech designers. "How did you even graduate if no one wants to hire you?"

"I ahh.. I missed my final semester. I technically didn't graduate..."

Ves couldn't help but palm his face. While a mech designer didn't necessarily need a degree in order to achieve success, Filkis obviously wasn't one of those rare exceptions. He started to regret invading this mech workshop. He should have gone for the ones next door.

He briefly contemplated killing Filkis and trying his luck elsewhere, but figured that the other workshops might not be better off. This area seemed to be the dumping ground for the most incompetent mech designers.

Besides, Ves didn't need to rely on Filkis to fabricate his gear. He only needed to borrow his credentials in order to operate the workshop.

Killing Filkis wouldn't be helpful because his death would lock out all of the systems to Ves. While it was possible for Filkis to transfer his rights to Ves, that wouldn't stick if Filkis died immediately after. Outdated as they were, the production machines came with tons of safeguards that Ves wouldn't be able to overcome on his own.

So for better or worse, Ves needed Filkis alive.

"Do you have a galactic net connection?"

"Uh, of course? Why?"

Thank the heavens! As soon as Filkis opened the galactic net interface, Ves pushed him to a corner where he could easily shoot the coward if he moved and started typing in a couple of addresses.

After spending many months without receiving news of the outside galaxy, Ves was starving for news. He first browsed a couple of news portals and tried to look up the news on the LMC.

"Hmm, they're doing well for themselves."

Ves dared not to linger too long on this topic. He only read enough articles to confirm the LMC continued to grow and sold a lot of Crystal Lords and Blackbeaks. The two iconic mech models had really started to make a splash in the Bright Republic's mech market.

He looked up the current state of the war after that. The frontlines still looked like a giant back-and-forth, with neither side gaining the edge. The Bright Republic held off the furious Vesian assaults for now. The Mech Legion already showed signs of exhaustion, and it wouldn't be long before they became too winded to continue their invasion.

Strangely enough, news about the Flagrant Vandals arriving in the Detemen System had also spread. The news was fragmentary as too many dubious

sources wanted to put in a word, but overall the Vesians didn't hold out hope that the Detemen System could repel the Vandals by themselves.

After a couple of minutes of apprising himself of the current news, Ves turned back to his immediate needs. Knowing the state of the war wasn't as important as getting back to the protective embrace of the Vandals.

To that end, Ves visited a couple of murky places on the galactic net. He navigated to coded areas and inputted a lot of passwords before retrieving a batch of highly encrypted archives.

Once he downloaded the archives to the workshop's systems, he disengaged the galactic net and unlocked them by inputting even more passwords. He also verified his identity by letting the command console take some samples of his body.

Ves grinned as he overcame the final hurdle. Within the encrypted vault of the archive he retrieved from the galactic net, a whole database of equipment designs revealed itself to his eyes.

"Now I'm in business."

These weren't mech designs. Instead, every design consisted of every possible equipment that Ves might need to survive on an inhabitable or uninhabitable planet. With these designs, he could fabricate anything from aircars to comms to hazard suits, all of them in dozens of different variations to suit the resources at his disposal.

"Sorry Filkis, but I'm going to have to borrow your production line."

The Vesian mech designer practically cried when he heard those words.

Chapter 467 Gearing Up

Ves experienced too many close shaves with death. Some of those incidents wouldn't have been so bad if Ves just made some better preparations

beforehand. Therefore, after the Glowing Campaign, he began to setup several contingency plans.

One of his plans entailed obtaining many different equipment designs. If he ever needed something urgent, and possessed access to the galactic net, he would always be able to retrieve his database of designs and put them to use whenever he had access to a workshop.

Normally, acquiring such a vast database of designs was hard. Equipment manufacturers dearly prized their best designs and did everything they could to keep them out of circulation. Ves had to ask Dietrich to utilize his connections to the black market to obtain this valuable catalog of illegally obtained designs.

"Illegal or not, it hardly matters when my presence in the Detemen System is already an affront."

Ves started to select some choice devices to fabricate. His choice list included a decent-quality comm, an aircar that integrated a couple of stealth and ECM systems and a set of light combat armor.

He only hesitated on which backpack module he should choose. The light combat armor suit featured a modular slot in the back that could fit all kinds of auxiliary systems, from smoke generators to a powerful communications array.

"Right now, the most important priority for me is to go from A to B. I need to reach the Vandals, preferably without getting shot by my own side."

Ves was acutely aware of his current state of dress. His shabby outfit marked him as one of the many hoodlums that prowled the alleyways of Neron City. It was hardly an appearance that befit a mech designer.

"Getting a communications array will help me get into contact with the survivors of the Stubby Growler's destruction."

After a moment of consideration, he reconsidered and went for a poor man's version of a stealth module.

He truly wanted to pick the communicator, but other doubts stayed his decision. Trying to communicate with the Vandals risked being intercepted by the Vesians. That was why he didn't try to contact the Vandals through the galactic net either. The Vandals didn't care too much for the galactic net, and it was far too easy to be mistaken as a prankster.

Considering that he had to traverse across the entire city, some of it by foot, then a stealth backpack made more sense. It was nowhere near as effective as the stealth augment of his old comm, but it would help him hide from unfocused scans and weak recorders, making it a little bit more difficult for the Vesians to hone in on him once he entered a more densely populated area of Neron City.

The only problem now was that even if he picked the most basic versions of these designs, the workshop still lacked too many critical materials to fabricate them all. Ves scowled at Filkis.

"Your stock of materials is so poor. What have you been fabricating your mechs with? Most of your inventory is filled with junk!"

"I can't work with anything more expensive! They're harder to shape and too expensive for me to obtain."

"Show me your designs."

"Pardon?"

Ves extended his hands. "I want to see how good you are. Let me see your designs."

Filkis obviously didn't wish to embarrass himself in front of a more superior mech designer, but Ves was the one with the gun here. Filkis unwillingly

displayed his complete design schematics through the command console's projector.

Ves studied the handful of designs. All of them fell in the light weight class, and consisted of variants of the same base model. However, the biggest thing to note was that the design actually depicted a felinid bestial mech.

Basically, it looked like a light and lean mech-sized cat.

Though its lines looked elegant, underneath it all he spotted several crude modifications to its internals. The base model originally came with sharp alloy claws, but for some reason Filkis wanted to replace them with heated blades. This required an extensive overhaul of the limbs, something which even Ves needed to be careful.

Filkis seemingly didn't know the meaning of care in the way he brutally ripped away important portions to the functioning of the limbs.

"Did the MTA even certify this variant?"

"Uh, not yet. It's my latest version and I'm still working on it..."

"If you want my advice, drop this variant now. It belongs in the trash can. Stick to the base model instead and understand how it works before you make an attempt at messing with things beyond your understanding."

Ves did not feel the need to spare the feelings of a Vesian mech designer. Out of professional courtesy, he gave Filkis the best advice he needed to hear.

The Vesian did not look pleased. "Am I really that bad?"

"You should have pursued another career instead of chasing to become a mech designer."

If Ves continued putting Filkis down, he had no doubt he could drive the Vesian to suicide. It was just that Filkis was just so bad as a mech designer. He wasn't someone who had recently entered the industry and still had much

too learn. The man toiled in the most awful conditions and had never been able to elevate himself to a higher tier.

Ves even started to pity Filkis.

"Alright, since it seems like you don't have the materials I need, I'll just have to get them elsewhere. Where is the nearest warehouse? Do you know any mech designers that stockpile a lot of raw materials?"

"I know of one guy who's better off than most. He operates the mech workshop down the street. There's also a small depot at a nearby crossroads that sells some of the rarer materials for mech designers in a pinch."

"Great! Lead the way!"

The next hour, Filkis led Ves towards a handful of promising locations that held the things he needed. This time, Ves did not feel inclined to waste any time, and straight up smashed through the facilities and overpowered every obstacle in his way. The Amastendira's awesome power completely dominated his opposition.

Since Ves didn't need to borrow their machines, he didn't hold any qualms about killing them. Filkis watched horrified as the corpses of his former rivals lay dead on the floor as Ves proceeded to ransack their storerooms for the materials he needed.

Bots continued to bring more and more materials to Filkis' workshop. The line of bots occasionally attracted attention, but Ves decisively shot his Amastendira at anyone who thought they could get a piece of the action. Eventually, the scorched and fallen bodies deterred any other opportunists from messing with his looting operation.

With the collection of a handful of junk exotics, Ves proceeded to fabricate the most essential piece of gear for him. A comm geared towards hacking.

While Ves wasn't a hacker, Melkor taught him how to hack simple machines using automated scripts and software. With the help of these tools, he should be able to hack some easy gear.

It took only fifteen minutes to complete the delicate wrist comm device. Ves needed to exert a fair amount of precision to maintain control over the fabrication of such a small and delicate device.

While Ves mainly fabricated mechs, that didn't mean he wouldn't be able to fabricate anything smaller. Mechs used plenty of tiny, delicate components so fabricating a comm was still within his skillset.

The only trouble about this particular model was that its hacking modules demanded several high-quality trace exotics to be able to work at its best. Ves needed to raid four different locations before he finally gathered all of the requisite materials.

Ves kept his original comm on his right wrist, but put his hacking comm on his left wrist. He grinned as soon as he turned it on and installed a custom operating system that came with the design. "Now I'm in business."

Obtaining the hacking module made his life ten times easier. Ves immediately entered the other workshops and unceremoniously hacked whatever bots survived his initial intrusion. Their outdated models and simple programming provided zero challenges for his hacking comm.

With the appropriation of so many bots, many more materials started pouring in Filkis' workshop. Ves rapidly made use of the abundant supply of materials by fabricating his next pieces of gear.

First, he formed his light combat armor. As none of the workshops he visited held an alloy compressor, Ves had to make due with an inferior variant that wouldn't be able to withstand a lot of hits. It was better than fabric, at least, so Ves made do with what he produced.

Next up, he fabricated a small and boring-looking aircar. It didn't look different from any vehicles that graced the skies of Neron City. Ves even took the time to tweak its outer appearance to ensure that it would blend in with the crowd.

The aircar actually hid some surprises underneath. Besides stuffing in some stealth and ECM systems, Ves also incorporated much better armor, enough to withstand a couple of projectiles.

The aircar obviously took the longest to finish. The skies already started to glow as the twin suns emerged from the horizon by the time that Ves put the finishing touches on the vehicle.

As Ves smiled in satisfaction at the products of his labor, Filkis let out a sigh of admiration.

"Impressive! You are truly impressive! You work so fast, but you never lost control. How did you do it?"

Ves only became this good due to the System, but he would never tell Filkis the truth. Instead, he spun a convenient line of nonsense.

"It's nothing. The main difficulty in upping your fabrication ability is to master your theoretical knowledge. This goes double for a dropout like you. Just because you've left your school doesn't mean you should stop learning something new. Achieving success in mech design is highly dependent on what you are capable of, and the only way to expand your capabilities in mech design is to keep studying. Even I never stopped learning something.

"Textbooks are too expensive." Filkis muttered. "I can't afford the good books that cost hundreds of thousands of sovies to buy."

"Knowledge is expensive, you know. If your budget isn't big enough to buy a good book, then buy a cheaper one. I know for certain that there are many textbooks for sale that only cost a couple of hundred credits. Sure, their

contents will be rather shallow, but a mech designer of your level won't understand the subtleties incorporated in the more expensive books."

This gave Filkis some food for thought. The cheaper books often contained very little material of substance, and were often written by Novices or Apprentices desperate for money.

Filkis began to grow on Ves a little. The man seemed so unthreatening that Ves didn't feel inclined to kill him anymore. Perhaps he would make a name for himself one day after he finally moved beyond this difficult time.

As Ves loaded his aircar with a couple of supplies and other gear he scrounged from the workshops, Ves turned back to Filkis and waved goodbye.

"It was nice knowing you. Sorry about holding you at gunpoint, but needs must."

"I.. I hope you don't return."

"Haha!" Ves laughed. "Me neither!"

Filkis finally breathed a sigh of relief once Ves stepped inside the aircar and departed his workshop. As the aircar hugged the ground and hovered away, Filkis watched on from the ruined front entrance and contemplated the aftermath.

"He wrecked my bots and looted the neighboring workshops and didn't even have the decency to take responsibility!"

Too many signs led back to his workshop that Filkis felt highly unsafe. As much as he wanted to stick it out in this workshop he called home for several years, it was time for him to move on. He did not want to take the blame for anything the invader might have done.

"Damn it, where can I go?"

Chapter 468 Defenseless

As his newly fabricated aircar carefully traversed the dangerous streets of Neron City, Ves needed to pay attention to a lot possible threats.

Rioters and troublemakers revelled in the streets, brandishing their weapons as they helped themselves to goods normally out of their reach. Too many businesses burned due to a complete absence of law and order. Ves wondered where the local Planetary Guard had gone.

"Did Lord Javier recall them all to defend his own hide?"

Whatever the case, the total lack of authority on the streets brought out the best and worst out of every citizen left behind. As his aircar discretely flew over their heads, he spotted lootings, rioting and senseless destruction.

Detemen IV obviously hadn't been governed very well, because the outskirts of Neron City hosted an enormous underclass of people who felt they had nothing to lose.

Still, various communities and neighborhood associations banded together as well to protect their homes and businesses against the jackals that wanted to take what they wanted. Occasionally, fighting between different groups broke out on the streets, and Ves often had to take a detour if he didn't want his aircar to be hit by a stray projectile.

After a long time of very slow and very cautious flight, his aircar finally left the slums and entered into the city proper. The residential areas he flew over seemed more orderly and cleaner, though the area hadn't completely escaped the anarchy that gripped the planet.

A lot less random thugs prowled the streets, but in their stead Ves spotted far more organized gangs sporting much better gear. Ves needed to rely more and more on his stealth systems to get by, but that didn't help much when someone spotted his aircar flying by with the naked eye.

"Aircar! Touch down immediately or be fired upon!"

"Yeah, no thanks!"

Ves responded by maxing out his propulsion. The aircar quickly lurched forward with a hail of lasers and projectiles peppering his wake.

The only problem with moving so fast was that his aircar's stealth systems became ineffective. Other gangs in the aircar's path detected the vehicle flying above their turf and responded with violence.

Due to its flimsy construction, the aircar couldn't withstand too much damage. Its bottom became increasingly scarred as long-ranged infantry fire occasionally scored a lucky hit.

Ves watched with distress as the integrity of the aircar declined at a rapid tempo.

"Damn these thugs! Don't they have better things to do than shooting an aircar out of the sky?"

No one traveled in the air during times of turmoil. It was too easy to be mistaken as an enemy, and flying a vehicle above the heads of others had a tendency of making most of them uncomfortable.

Flying in the air also happened to be a bad idea because any vehicle that flew above the cityline would be horribly exposed to fire.

After a small missile hit the rear of his aircar, Ves cursed again and lowered the altitude of his car. He didn't like travelling so low through the streets, but it would at least cut off the line of sight of attackers from the neighboring streets.

Unfortunately, lowering his altitude also exposed him to the armed people in his path. As the car accumulated more damage, its stealth systems became increasingly less effective.

"What's that?"

"It's an aircar! Shoot it down!"

Flying through the latest barrage of fire directed in its way caused the car to finally reach its limit. An important antigrav module lost power, causing the vehicle to be unable to keep it aloft. Ves desperately controlled the aircar's descent into a controlled crash.

Bang!

The aircar hit the street with a firm thud and slid forward with whatever forward momentum it had left. Once the battered vehicle stopped its slide, a door banged open and an armored figure jumped out.

"Someone came out!"

"Get him!"

More than two-dozen gang members approached his position. Unlike the lowlives Ves had encountered before, this gang exhibited much more coordination. They spread out and tried to encircle his position before assaulting him from several directions at once.

Ves considered his options, but found no better option than fighting his way out. He patted his light combat armor. Though it was made of fairly low-class materials, it still beat anything else the gang members used as armor.

He also possessed the Amastendira, which proved to be a decisive edge against his assailants.

"Die!"

Ves hid behind the wreckage of his aircar and shot at each exposed gang member. Though he missed more than he liked, many of his targets met their end when he simply readjusted his faulty aim with the beam still on. This made it incredibly easy for him to take out the opposition.

As he explicitly targeted anyone that seemed to be the leaders, Ves only killed five of them before they broke. The Amastendira's powerful capabilities completely intimidated the survivors, especially since Ves proved that even cover offered little protection against its powerful beams.

Still, routing the criminals came at a significant cost. The Amastendira only retained half a charge, and needed a lot of time to recharge by itself. "I can't afford to get dragged into another fight."

Besides, his light combat armor wasn't invincible either. Ves aimed to fabricate the stealthiest mechs with the resources at hand, and similar to designing mechs, Ves needed to make a lot of painful tradeoffs. Thick armor didn't mesh well with stealth.

"I've got to gear up again." Ves concluded as he studied the map projected by his helmet. He downloaded a map of Neron City from the galactic net, but it didn't help him out too much because it didn't depict the territories owned by the different gangs that held sway on the streets.

He eventually found a mid-sized mech workshop a few kilometers down the road to the center of the city. This workshop was much larger than the shabby excuses he had used last time. A better workshop would certainly contain better machines and resources. He already started to salivate at the thought of what he could fabricate with all of those goodies.

He sighed. "It's going to be tough getting past these stupid gangs."

Nevertheless, he decided to go forth, because he wouldn't be able to last forever on foot. He engaged his backpack module's stealth systems, which due to the lack of quality materials didn't do much but block long-range scans. It didn't make him invisible and neither did it block anything powerful, but at the very least nobody seemed to be hunting him down.

As Ves slowly took to the side streets and avoided every possible contact his combat suit's sensors detected up ahead, he also took in the sights.

A storm had already swept through some of the streets he passed. Currently, he made his way through a residential district comprised of apartment blocks, and some of them had been burned or emptied out already. Others seemed to hide a lot of scared and frightened Vesians. A few of them even peeked out their windows before drawing back their heads at the sight of an armored figure.

"Help! Help!" A woman screamed as a laughing group of people in gang colors dragged out several families from an upscale apartment block.

Men, women, girls and boys got beaten and lurched around as several gang members stormed their apartments and took out anything that seemed valuable.

Others had other intentions in mind. They gazed at their prisoners with depraved expressions.

"Hahahaha! First dibs on me!"

"Unhand me, you brute! I am the secretary of the Ailmont Carrie, the personal dog trainer of Lord Javier himself! When Mr. Carrie and our Lord finds out about this, there won't be any corner in the galaxy that can keep you safe!"

A few gang members faltered in their revelry at those words. Although she didn't occupy a very high position, her connections alone elevated her to a completely different class than the rest.

"What are you scared about?!" One gang member yelled at his comrades.

"Lord Javier is a goner soon! This is our chance!"

"Yeah! This hag has been strutting around with her nose pointed at the sky for far too long now! It's time she gets what is coming for her!"

"No! Mr. Carrie won't forgive you for this!"

It was obvious what the gang members intended for their captives. Ves quietly shook his head under his helmet and took a very wide detour around the congregating gang members. As much as his decency urged him to come to the rescue of innocents, he held no obligation to defend Vesian citizens.

They were still his enemy, after all. In fact, he should be glad to see Vesians turning against themselves. Ves would rather see them turn to infighting than to face a united front that maintained complete control over their own territory.

Thus, even as children screamed and men got shot, Ves closed his ears to the increasingly desperate pleas for help until he escaped far away for them to fade in the wind.

Ves encountered a few more incidents like this, mostly by gangs that got pushed out of the richer business streets that held the best loot. Unable to rob the best sites, they settled for the fancy homes occupied by higher-class commoners. While most were mainly out for goods like jewelry and luxury goods, others just wanted to get their hands on the people they formerly considered untouchable.

In short, a lot of disgraceful things happened in the apartment buildings he snuck past. The only good thing about it was that the more these kinds of things happened, the fewer people would be on the streets.

In this way, Ves managed to cross a fair distance as the twin suns reached high above the sky. Once he reached the end of the latest residential district in his way, a signal suddenly crackled from his military comm.

"Mr. Larkinson?" A clipped female voice spoke. "Please respond."

Ves frowned and made his way towards an alleyway before responding through his combat suit's communicator.

"Who is this?"

"My name is Lieutenant Burke. I am the former communications officer of the Rising Apple. Please check your comm, I've sent proof of my credentials."

The comm issued to him by the Flagrant Vandals couldn't perform a lot of functions, but it did do a few things fairly well. One of the core functions in his military comm was to verify the identities of any Vandal. His comm only took an instant to verify Lieutenant Burke's identity.

While it was possible that the woman who spoke over the comm had hacked the Vandal verification system, Ves thought it was unlikely for anyone to have done so. The Flagrant Vandals wouldn't utilize this system if it could be hacked so easily.

"I believe you, lieutenant. What would you have me do?"

"We are in the process of rallying every survivor of the Stubby Growler and the Rising Apple that made it into Neron City. We could desperate use the help of a mech designer."

"Did you get your hands on some Vesian mechs?"

"Yes, but we are unable to penetrate their systems and get them to work for us. We need your help to unlock these mechs."

Ves closed his eyes. If they had trouble bypassing the security measures of the Vesian mechs, then Alloc probably wasn't among their ranks. The Journeyman Mech Designer was a wizard with anything related to software, which meant he could be a scary hacker as well.

Hopefully he made it through the Stubby Growler's destruction.

Ves opened his eyes and nodded. "If you need my help, my services are at your group's disposal."

"That's great! We've fixed your location through your comm. Stay put. We'll be sending a retrieval party after you, ETA twenty minutes. If you're spotted and under attack, please let us know. Out."

"Will do, lieutenant."

As Ves closed the channel, he felt a little mixed at the unexpected contact. He hadn't expected to get in touch with the Vandals so soon, and certainly not with other survivors of the combat carriers that succumbed to the Vesian missile attack.

"Still, there's safety in numbers. I'm no commando. I can barely sneak my way past apartment blocks. It's going to be ten times worse once I reach the downtown area."

Chapter 469 Captain Orfan

The retrieval party consisted of two exo-skeleton soldiers armed with looted gear. The scorch marks on their battered armor made it clear that they had survived entry into Detemen IV's atmosphere with their suits instead of crash balls.

They tensed for a moment after spotting an armored figure. Ves made sure to keep his Amastendira safely tucked in his intangible Inventory and stay still, so the newcomers quickly dismissed him as a threat.

"Mr. Larkinson, please take off your helmet." One of them instructed through a comm channel.

Ves did as he told. As he exposed his face, one of the soldiers scanned him with a device integrated in his suit. Apparently, whatever it did finally seemed to satisfy the Vandal infantrymen. "Your identity checks out. Please come with us."

It was a very new experience for him to be escorted by two human colossi. Ves briefly admired their armored shells and spotted many commonalities with

mechs. Naturally, an exo-skeleton suit wasn't a downscaled mech, so it featured a lot of other systems entirely unique to this type of war machine.

"Can you tell me about how many Vandals have gathered?"

They seemed to hesitate for a moment before replying. "Some of us who made it off the Stubby Growler and Rising Apple have landed closely together and fought with the locals. After a night of hard fighting, we took control over the base of a medium-sized mercenary corps.

"Without any friendly mechs?"

"Our suits proved to be sufficient."

Ves genuinely expressed his admiration of their feat. To take on a mid-sized mercenary corps that possessed at least fifteen to thirty mechs or so would be a challenge to any group of shipwrecked survivors. He couldn't even imagine how they had been able to overcome the mercenary mechs.

"Who's in charge?"

"Captain Rosa Orfan. She's the only mech captain among the group."

Ves hadn't heard of her, so she was probably stationed on the Rising Apple. Most of the mech pilots among the Vandals had deployed their mechs in space at the time the Vesians launched their Heavensfall and XX-REXX missiles. The only ones who hadn't been launched were the reserves and those responsible for piloting landbound mechs.

"How many mech pilots do we have?"

"Let's reach the base first. Captain Orfan or Lieutenant Burke will brief you from there."

They silently made their way past wrecked aircars and wretched corpses. The fighting in this area was a lot more intense. Ves spotted signs of heavier

weapon usage. He even noted the tell-tale signs of mechs stomping through the streets.

He was already burning with questions, but the two meatheads kept insisting that he should leave his questions for the officers. Grunts like them only learned how to operate their suits and to obey their orders. Nothing more.

Strangely enough, they encountered no resistance, mostly because the heavily armored soldiers already cleaned up the trash along the way. Ves spotted several corpses that had obviously been done in by the heavy ballistic rifles wielded by his escorts.

Just two of them wiped out an entire score of thugs. The disparity in power between the two and Ves couldn't be more wider. As much as exo-skeleton suits lacked the allure enjoyed by mechs, both of them were powerful in their own right. They just served different purposes.

After a while, they finally reached a shabby base that used to be tidy before the Vandals invaded the Detemen System. The gates had been breached, and as Ves passed through them he realized why. The Vandals somehow hijacked a transport shuttle and crashed through.

Unfortunately, this led to a huge field of debris behind the gates that made it difficult for the three to find their footing. While the exo-skeleton suited men could crush some of the smaller stuff, the tougher alloys wouldn't bend under their weight.

"You've got to clean this up."

"We have bigger priorities to take care of first."

After making it through the debris field, they entered a small office building sitting next to the mech stables. Ves entered the elevator alone and reached the top floor before someone else guided him to an office that formerly belonged to the mercenary in charge.

"Mr. Larkinson." A toned woman greeted behind the desk. "Please take a seat. We have some matters to discuss."

As Ves rested his armored form on the chair, he studied the captain sitting on the other side of the desk. Rosa Orfan looked like a typical mech pilot. Featuring the lean, muscled physique of a warrior trained to endure the rigors of mech combat, she looked like she meant business.

She pointed a dusky-skinned finger at him. "As of this moment, you are the first mech designer we've retrieved from the Stubby Growler and the Rising Apple. I had hoped to snag Mr. Alloc, but I guess we'll have to make do with you. I hope you have no objections serving under me."

Her tone made it clear that she brooked no refusal. Not that Ves intended to refuse in the first place. Although he didn't fall into the usual chain of command, in emergency situations like this, it was best to defer to the officer in charge.

"I will obey your orders to the best of my abilities, ma'am." Ves solemnly replied. "Although if I may ask, what are your plans? Have you made contact with the Vandals yet?"

Ves did not think that Captain Orfan's little band had stayed out of contact with the main Vandal fleet. Earlier, he managed to browse the galactic net, so Captain Orfan or Lieutenant Burke must have certainly done the same.

"We made contact with the fleet as well as the local rebels." Orfan acknowledged with a nod. "It's been decided that we won't be returning to the main elements of the Vandals immediately."

Ves blinked at that. "We aren't going back?"

"Not yet. Since we have already arrived at Neron City, we might as well pave the way for main ground force."

"Uhm, what are our objectives, ma'am?"

"Currently, the ground force doesn't need our help in raiding the manufacturing complexes. We're too far away from the industrial districts to provide any assistance anyway. Instead, we've been tasked with coordinating with the Detemen League in rooting out Lord Javier. There are strong signs that the scion of House Eneqqin is still within city limits."

"How can that be, ma'am? If I were him, I would have fled on a ship or deep underground."

"The rebels have ruled out both possibilities. They prepared a lot of anti-air batteries, and they've been very successful in shooting down anything that attempts to lift off from Neron City and its surroundings. As for escaping underground, the rebels are far more adept at this than Lord Javier. It's their home turf. They already stopped a handful of digger vehicles from making it off."

Ves wasn't sure about the effectiveness of the rebel blockades, but they had no choice but to believe in them. This so-called Detemen League must really hate Lord Javier if they went through the trouble of cutting his escape route above and below the ground.

"What are my duties?"

"Right now, the men and women under my command are doing everything they can to find any clues about the whereabouts of Lord Javier. The rebels have been at it for a while as well, so our assistance won't amount to much. Still, I don't think that Javier can escape our detection, because many mechs haven't shown up at the defense line that House Eneqqin's troops have erected to repel our main ground force."

Mechs were so big and heavy that it would be impossible to hide them from precise enough scans. Only mechs that featured excellent stealth systems

possessed a chance at evading detection, and there was no way that House Eneqqin employed so many stealthed mechs.

Ves understood his duties. He needed to bring the mechs of the former mercenary corps under control, because they would be needed to join the impending hunt for Lord Javier.

"What kind of assets are at my disposal?"

"A handful of mech technicians of the Stubby Growler and the Rising Apple have made it through. They've been instructed to answer to you."

"There's no chief among their ranks?"

"Sadly, no."

Ves would make do, but he didn't like it. From his experience, mech technicians had a tendency to work half as much or less when chief technicians were absent. He hoped that the gravity of their situation sank into their stupid skulls. This was no time to slack off and take it easy.

"How many mech pilots do I need to provide with a mech?"

"This mercenary corps owned fourteen intact mechs. Currently, we've gathered five mech pilots excluding myself, so I want you to bring at least six mechs online. More Vandal mech pilots may trickle in at any time, so don't think you're done when you delivered six working mechs."

"Understood. I'll continue to work on the mechs as long as my orders hold. One question, ma'am. Is the Detemen League providing any assistance?"

"They sent us a few containers worth of supplies to set us up, but they are not a fighting force that relies on mechs. Citizens from Detemen IV who have the potential to be mech pilots enjoy a lot of privileges from House Eneqqin. This makes them anathema to the Detemen League. Therefore, they won't be able to provide us with mechs, mech pilots and supplies."

The true strength of the Detemen League lay in their influence over the auxiliary regiments. This wasn't useful to the Flagrant Vandals because all of their proficiencies and fighting doctrines revolved around mechs and only mechs.

"Do they have a presence here?"

"No one except for a liaison they left behind. Most of their fighters are attacking House Eneqqin from their rear as we speak. It will only be a matter of time before they're grinded between the rebels and our main ground force. The only members of the Detemen League that's still spread over the city is tasked with securing supplies or finding the whereabouts of Lord Javier."

They were on their own for now. No one could spare anymore resources that might help with their predicament.

"May I ask something?"

"Permission granted." Captain Orfan leaned back in her chair. Ever since he accepted her command, she visibly eased some of her tension, as if a weight had been lifted off her chest.

"How important is it for us to find Lord Javier?"

Captain Orfan turned grave. "This is a very important mission. The Detemen League only acceded to the plans cooked up by Colonel Lowenfield and the Vesian Revolutionary Front because of our commitment to hunt him down. Leaving empty-handed will severely damage our standing with not only the League, but every other local rebel group as well. Our credibility and ability to sneak through Vesian space hinges on our success here."

Ves understood, even if he didn't think that Orfan was as optimistic as she appeared. Ves could think of a hundred different ways he could hide his presence from the rebels and the Vandals. Lord Javier may be a dirtbag, but

he sounded like the type who valued his life. No method was too unseemly if it could help him survive the manhunt on his head.

They talked a bit more and Ves received a bit more instructions before he left her makeshift office. Ves turned on his comm which already received a map of the former mercenary grounds. He followed the shortest route downstairs and walked over the the nearby mech stables.

As he approached the fairly quiet structure, he looked up at the name of the mercenary corps put up at the front.

JAVIER'S DASTARDLY HANDSOME BASTARDS

Ves smirked as he read it. The bastards probably incorporated Javier's name to ingratiate themselves in his eyes.

"Well, I hope their mechs are up to snuff if Lord Javier has approved of their existence."

Chapter 470 Software

Only half a dozen mech technicians lounged in the mech stables. All of them appeared to be seasoned men and women, so at least Ves wouldn't be dealing with inexperienced rookies.

He still wore his light combat armor, which would be suitable to wear among soldiers, but not among techs. So Ves removed his helmet before addressing the techs.

"My name is Ves Larkinson, and I'll be taking charge from here on out." He stated simply, trying to channel his inner chief technician.

Having observed several chiefs in his brief career, Ves learned that they didn't throw their weight around too much. They just seemed to radiate confidence that their word was law and that obedience was a given. The assumption of authority often times turned into actual authority.

In other words, as long as Ves pretended to be the boss, other people would see him as the boss.

"Who are you?" A burly woman asked with narrowed eyes. "We ain't listening to brats like you. Scram!"

"I'm a mech designer."

That caused a couple of the mech technicians to laugh. "That's all the more reason for you to get out! You useless nerds are all the same, thinking you can boss us simple-minded grease monkeys around. Well we grease monkeys know far more about putting mechs back together than you ever will!"

Ves understood what went on. They probably mistook Ves for a low-ranked mech designer that would often be assigned to supervise the mech technicians in the workshops and machine shops. Ves felt for some sympathy for the techs if they had been ordered to follow instructions from a sad sack of meat like Filkis.

However, Ves was not Filkis.

If the assumption of authority failed to go through their thick skulls, then maybe a more direct application of power would work. Ves walked closer and closer until he almost pressed his face against the chest of the tallest and presumably strongest mech technician.

"Will you listen to my orders, I do I have to teach you a lesson?"

Everyone grinned, and the tall guy crossed his meaty arms as if he faced an angry kitten. "You? Teach me a lesson? Are you even qualified?"

Though his combat armor gave him a bit of height, Ves couldn't match the bulk of the tech in front of him. Nevertheless, Ves reared his armored fist back

before punching forward. He deliberately telegraphed the move because he wanted to make a point.

All the techs including his target looked on with amusement. Light combat armor didn't add any strength enhancements to the wearer like an exo-skeleton suit. Thus, they all expected this young and delicate-looking nerd to hurt his own knuckles.

What actually happened was the giant tech getting punched off his feet. His body slid backwards and landed in a painful heap. To his credit, the man didn't scream out in pain, but his squirming made it clear that the punch had dealt a significant amount of damage.

"What are you?! You're no mech designer!"

"You cheated! There must be some engine buried beneath his combat armor!"

"SILENCE!" Ves yelled. Though his voice sounded a little shrill, the apprehension he evoked among the techs with his punch caused them to take him seriously for once. "Fall in and report!"

After helping the tall guy up his feet, the techs all formed a line.

"We're at your disposal, sir!"

They proceeded to get down to business. Ves toured the mech stables and workshop areas that the Vandals appropriated from Javier's Dastardly Handsome Bastards. The techs pointed out a couple of details of each mech along the way, half of which consisted of light and medium bestial mechs.

All of the mechs hung silently in their berths, unable to be roused from their slumber without the right access credentials.

"Is anyone from Javier's Dastardly Handsome Bastards left alive? We might have a chance of unlocking them with the help of a prisoner."

They all shook their heads. "We all thought of that before, but the Bastards ran away through an emergency escape tunnel when they realized they wouldn't be able to hold the base. Every survivor got away clean."

"Damn." Ves sighed and looked at the fairly cheap but serviceable mechs.

The Flagrant Vandals needed these machines in working condition. Without mechs, the Vandals under Captain Orfan were only Vandals in name. Their ability to project power onto Neron City would be limited to just a few blocks from this former mercenary base.

"Have you managed to activate any mech through your own efforts?"

"No, sir." One of the technicians answered glumly. "We've tinkered with the hardware and software locks, and only managed to fudge the former a bit. We're clueless when it comes to getting around the restrictions set by the operating system."

"Let me take a look."

Ves climbed up to the cockpit of a bestial mech and analyzed the interior. He borrowed a few tools from the mech technicians that climbed with him and withdrew some panels to look at the electronic guts underneath.

"Well, the good news is that this is a fairly cheap and old mech model. Their security systems are relatively basic and I think it's possible for me to fudge these components."

"Will we be able to bring these mechs back online, sir?" The mech technicians glowed with hope. They finally started to acknowledge Ves as a competent mech designer.

"Not yet. These hardware locks are so basic that they're only here to prevent some whiz monkey from hacking this mech from a distance. The true challenge for me is to overcome the security restrictions in the software."

A modern mech was not a giant mechanical clockwork that operated through hydraulics, steam pressure or ropes. Mechs were far too complex to rely on such simple and antiquated control methods.

Instead, a mech was more akin to a control center surrounded by thousands of different systems and subsystems.

To control such a gargantuan collection of mechanisms through simple commands was so ludicrous that any mech designer who proposed such a thing would be stripped of his accreditation and be booted from the mech industry!

Having worked under Alloc for a couple of times, Ves gained a new appreciation of the importance of good programming. The material components formed the body, while the programming acted as the mind that allowed the components to work in unison.

Therefore, the complete lock imposed by the operating systems by the mechs simply couldn't be bypassed through any simple methods, such as wiping them out and installing new programming.

Ves either needed to work within the rules imposed by the operating system, or he needed to hack it in a way that didn't trip any failsafes.

"I really wish Alloc was here. He would have unlocked these mechs with the snap of his fingers."

Sadly, the task fell to him. It was a good thing he wasn't completely helpless in this regard. His self-made comm still contained a suite of hacking software. It should be able to hack most lastgen mech models below a certain price point, but the Dastardly Handsome Bastards happen to utilize currentgen mech models instead.

His bootleg hacking software might not be very effective, but the only way to find out was for Ves to make the attempt.

"Stand back." He instructed everyone else. "I'm going to attempt to hack the mechs. While I don't think anything will happen if I fail, the Bastards may have booby-trapped them against attempts at theft."

The mech technicians obediently retreat. Ves even placed his helmet back on his head to form a completely protective seal.

"Here goes nothing."

Ves activated his hacking software and directed it to work on the bestial mech. Its console came to life and spat out a torrent of data, much of it Ves didn't understand. After a minute or so of scrambling, the console finally displayed a very firm message.

[ACCESS DENIED.]

"It was worth a try."

Ves didn't give up. He left the cockpit of that mech and tried to hack another one.

[ACCESS DENIED.]

Undeterred, Ves continued to cycle through several mech. When he reached the sixth mech, Ves finally received a different message.

[ACCESS GRANTED.]

"Yes! It worked!"

The bestial mech in question successfully came online. The cockpit bloomed to life as many different consoles lit up. Outside, its exterior lit up a bit as several lights blinked in different colors that corresponded to a standard startup sequence.

"Mr. Larkinson did it!"

If nothing else, his success truly cemented his authority over the mech technicians. When Ves squirmed out of the cockpit, he ordered them to ready the mech for action.

"Refuel this mech and perform some light service on it while you're at it. Get it done within an hour as we can't afford to keep it idle for long. We need to start the hunt for Lord Javier as soon as possible, and we won't be able to go anywhere without our own mechs."

"Aye, sir, we'll get on it right away!"

They didn't hesitate at all this time. Mech technicians without working mechs were like fish out of water. Now that they finally got to taste some drops, they immediately focused on their tasks. They hadn't forgotten the import of their duties.

Ves nodded in satisfaction. Even without a chief technician riding over their shoulders, they possessed enough sense not to slack off for too much. Still, as he paused and observed their work, he found out why these techs ended up in the Vandals instead of a more prestigious mech regiment.

Their ability didn't quite measure up to the true professionals of the Mech Corps. The amount of care and attention they put to their own safety was worrisome, and some exhibited annoying habits such as banging their tools against the object they were trying to service if anything didn't go too well.

"Stop trying to hit the mech with your multitool!"

"Uh, ahm, sorry, sir!"

A few minutes later, the same guy started hitting the mech with his tools again.

Problematic or not, Ves didn't have anything else to work with, so he tolerated their eccentricities. Now that he got one mech to work, he was eager to unleash his hacking software to the other mechs in the stables.

After entering and exiting around twenty mechs in decent shape, he got around six of them online. Three of them consisted of bestial mechs while the other three consisted of humanoid rifleman mechs. It was a good mix of mechs, and should serve Captain Orfan well.

He contacted his superior through his comm. "I've got one mech ready to go, with five more mechs in the pipeline, ma'am. As for the remaining mechs of the Dastardly Handsome Bastards, it's unlikely I'll be able to get them up and running any time soon."

"I knew you wouldn't disappoint me!" Captain Orfan grinned in a savage manner. "Good work, Mr. Larkinson. Six mechs are sufficient for now, as I don't have a lot more mech pilots to spare. Ready them all for action as soon as possible. The main Vandal ground force is being stalled by much more resistance from Eneqqin's household troops than we anticipated. It's vitally important that we take over some of their duties from behind enemy lines."

Ves wondered whether their meager numbers would amount to anything, but he kept his doubts to himself. "I do have to mention that three of the mechs are bestial instead of humanoid. Will that present a problem?"

That caused Orfan to drop her grin a bit. The Flagrant Vandals uniformly utilized humanoid mechs.

The only exception might be the Akkara heavy cannoneer, but that was basically a really big and fat humanoid mech with four instead of two legs. It didn't take too much effort for a normal mech pilot to adjust to its control schemes.

"I will be certain to warn my men." She said, though her tone belied the difficulties in store for her mech pilots. "Please prepare the training modules on the mechs in question. Perhaps they could benefit from a brief refresher course."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll prepare the materials."

Orfan shut off the channel, leaving Ves with very few instructions. It didn't take too long for Ves to put the bestial mechs in training mode. After that, he instructed the mech technicians to welcome the mech pilots and assist them into taking control of the hacked mechs.

Ves already turned his gaze to the other mechs that stubbornly remained locked. He knew that Captain Orfan's detachment wouldn't be able to accomplish anything of significance with six shabby mechs.

"More mech pilots will certainly trickle in during the day. There's not enough time for the Vandals to complete their objectives. The more mechs I can bring online, the better our chances of completing our objectives."

And making it out of Vesian space alive.