

### Chapter 471 Hacking

Ves never put the software aspect of mechs in his eyes.

When he started out with developing variants, he always utilized the complete control system that came with the base model.

When he moved on to designing his own original mechs, he mostly pieced together the different software that came with with the component licenses. To get them to communicate and work together in a seamless fashion, he unified them into an off-the-shelf operation system that he randomly bought from the MTA.

The MTA developed these operating systems for maximum compatibility and minimal chances of bugs and errors. They'd been polished to such an insane degree that even the shabbiest heaps of junk on legs would be able to operate smoothly as long as its shambling components held up.

"A good operating system is like a very bright mind. The highest quality software can elevate the performance of the weakest mechs to a higher level."

With such a convenient solution at hand, Ves never spent much effort into improving his ability to program a mech, let alone hack its operating system. If Ves still possessed the System, his Status would clearly state that his Computer Science Skill still stood out with an abysmally low evaluation of Incompetent.

Normally, his approach to this field didn't pose a problem to him. As much as a mech designer pretended to be all-knowing when it concerned their profession, he never intended to learn every possible aspect about designing mechs. Even if he possessed something as absurd as the System, Ves would have to spend too much DP to upgrade every possible Skill and Sub-Skill.

"I should have at least spent a few thousand DP to upgrade my Computer Science to Novice or Apprentice or something."

If he had done something like that, then he may be in a better position to hack the tough cases that remained in the mech stables.

In truth, hacking was an extremely complex field and profession in its own right. Mech designers generally worked on the other side of the fence and tried to make their mechs as impenetrable to virtual invasions as possible. They never put any importance in learning how to hack someone else's mechs.

"If Captain Orfan has a full crew under her command, then she'd surely have a professional hacker under her command."

Hackers of all kind still thrived during the Age of Mechs. Much of their battles occurred out of sight, but their clashes sometimes reached apocalyptic proportions in virtual space. As poor as the 6th Flagrant Vandals might seem, they certainly wouldn't have neglected their hackers and virtual security experts.

Ves turned on his comm and contacted Lieutenant Burke. A projection of the communications officer's face appeared over his armored wrist.

"May I help you, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Does Captain Orfan have any hackers at her disposal?"

"No." The lieutenant shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Larkinson, but we've been prioritizing the search for hackers even over other mech pilots. Our efforts have turned up fruitless so far."

The crew complement of a combat carrier didn't include a lot of hackers. Chances were low that the few hackers aboard the destroyed vessels had

ended up on Detemen IV. Even if their crash balls or hazard suits took them to the planet, they might have landed far away from Neron City.

Thus, they may never be able to retrieve their own hackers before their time in the system was up. Ves came up with a different solution to overcome this problem.

"Since chances are low that some of our hackers will return, I think we should enlist the services of local hackers instead."

The lieutenant frowned at that. "You want to rely on Vesian hackers to unlock those mech?"

"You're in touch with the Detemen League, right? Surely they can spare some hackers for us."

"We've already asked for assistance, but to no avail. Every hacker in their employ is busy with scouring through databases and records in a concerted effort to find out where Lord Javier is hiding. It's impossible for them to spare even a single hacker away from this crucial task."

That explained why the rebels hadn't lent a hand. Still, Ves didn't give up on his idea yet. "If we can't borrow the services of a rebel hacker, then why not someone else? Millions of people live in Neron City. There should be thousands of people among them with hacking expertise. Just grab the closest ones you can find and force them to work for us."

"That's madness!" The lieutenant blew up. "Although a skilled hacker might be able to unlock those mechs, they can also slip in any number of sabotage. Who can tell whether they'll embed spying software that broadcasts the positions of our mechs to House Eneqqin's troops? Hackers can do so much more than that."

She had a valid point, but Captain Orfan wouldn't be able to accomplish any of her tasks if they didn't do anything.

"If their loyalty is in question, then why not track down and kidnap their family members as well?" Ves suggested. "As long as you hold enough leverage over their heads, they'll obediently do what we want."

He thought that a Vandal would accept his words without blinking. Instead, the lieutenant looked at him with horror.

"We do not condone such behavior! The Flagrant Vandals might not enjoy the best reputation, but we uphold the values of the Republic. We do not approve of such despicable behavior."

Ves wanted to smack the lieutenant's face. What was she even saying? Their arrival into this system directly led to the misery on the streets. The Vandals already had a lot of blood in their hands, so what was the harm in dirtying them with a few more drops?

Just as Ves wanted to put out a retort, a third person intruded into their comm channel. "Lieutenant, back off."

"Captain Orfan!"

"Ma'am."

The lieutenant saluted at her superior while Ves nodded at her presence. He hadn't realized that she listened in on their conversation.

"Let me preface this by saying that the Flagrant Vandals aren't pirates and will never be anything like them." Orfan said, yet she looked apologetic at Lieutenant Burke. "However, our circumstances have landed us in a difficult place. We are far away from any friendly help. Both the rebels and the main ground force are preoccupied with their own priorities, and they have nothing to spare for us. We're on our own here."

"That should be no excuse to loosen our standards!"

"We've never played by the rules!" Orfan overturned the naive-sounding lieutenant. "We've broken more rules than we can count simply to keep the Flagrant Vandals afloat. Perhaps your shipboard assignments hasn't allowed you to get in touch with what we do, but I can tell you that Colonel Lowenfield herself wouldn't reject Mr. Larkinson's suggestion out of hand."

"B-B-But ma'am, we're part of the Mech Corps."

Ves found Lieutenant Burke's protestations very sad, in a way. Under normal circumstances, her opinion should have been the prevailing one. Yet such an idealistic attitude would have doomed the Flagrant Vandals many years ago.

Captain Orfan spoke correctly. The Vandals never played by the rules.

"The Mech Corps is fighting on the frontlines, holding the Mech Legion back on Republican soil. We on the other hand have snuck knee-deep into Vesian space. Our only allies are the tenuous Vesian rebels, who only agreed to cooperate with us because our interests happen to align on some matters. Without any other friends that can bail us out, we are basically at their whims."

"The rebels have made it more than clear that they want to drag Lord Javier from whatever hole he's hiding and execute him in the most painful and public manner possible." Ves added, though perhaps he acted a little too presumptuously because Captain Orfan sent him a dirty look.

Orfan coughed a bit. "Our timetable is shot to hell. Nothing is going according to plan. During times like this, it's necessary for us to be flexible."

Against her direct superior, Lieutenant Burke had no choice but to retreat. "I understand, ma'am."

"I'll draft some orders for you to pass on in a moment. I want you to task our intelligence specialists in finding the probable locations of any notable hackers in Neron City. Make sure to find where their families might reside as well."

We'll task our mechs and infantry to retrieve these Vesians once we find their locations. Mr. Larkinson will have his hackers soon enough."

The three-way channel closed, leaving Ves by himself. Just as he thought he had the Vandals figured out, the conversation just then showed that his judgement wasn't complete.

"Are the Vandals truly worthy to carry the banner of the Mech Corps?"

Perhaps they weren't as monolithic as Ves had initially suspected. He always treated them like a single monoculture where every Vandal more or less held similar ideas. Ves hadn't seen a dispute like the one between Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Burke even once since the months he had been with this mech regiment.

"Maybe it's a difference between a mech officer and a ship officer."

Even if they served under the flag of the Flagrant Vandals, they all formed their own cliques. Though they shared a common starting point when it came to their culture, they all possessed their own nuances.

In general, the ship crews let themselves be subordinated to the mech crews. A mech regiment revolved around their mechs, not their ships. Many mech pilots even dismissed the importance of modern carriers as space taxis for their mechs.

In the middle of this traditional dynamic, only Colonel Lowenfield broke the mold. By all accounts, she wasn't a mech pilot, yet she commanded the respect of all the Vandals, mech pilots or not. Even if her administrative skills had rescued the Vandals from the brink of bankruptcy, she must have mastered some secret sauce in order to win the hearts of every Vandal.

"Well, whatever. That's not important right now."

While Captain Orfan prepared her unit to follow his suggested course of action, Ves needed to make his own preparations.

Though the rudimentary network setup by the Vandals didn't allow him to connect to the galactic net, he still possessed his self-made comm.

Previously, in situations like this where his skills fell short, Ves would have spent his DP on upgrading whatever Skill was necessary to tackle the problem.

"I can't do that for the time being, but maybe I can do something similar."

Ves entered one of the many abandoned offices of the Dastardly Handsome Bastards and closed the door. After making himself comfortable, he activated his self-made comm and visited the virtual portal of the Clifford Society. He wasted no time to enter their Star Library.

As a Knight of the Society, Ves was allowed to read any textbook in the lowest library of the Society for free, and with much less restrictions.

If he tried to borrow a quality book from the Moon Library, he had to wait until someone physically delivered a special means for him to read the highly protected books.

"It's impossible for me to count on that in the middle of a war zone."

Fortunately, Ves didn't think of upgrading one of his higher Skills. He only wanted to brush up his extremely low-level Computer Science Skill, and perhaps pick up some pointers about Hacking along the process.

"My current Intelligence is rated at around 2.1, which is far above the genetic limit of humanity. I wonder how fast I can learn the basics of Hacking?"

Ever since he upgraded his Intelligence through the Transcendence Pill, he never made full use of his strongest Attribute in a learning capacity. His ability to cram new knowledge should have reached a frightening level.

His virtual avatar looked at the endless rows of simulated books and grinned like a shark. He already began to salivate at the prospect of devouring the knowledge hidden within at a record pace.

### Chapter 472 Clashing Values

The height of his current level of Intelligence had reached a ridiculous height. This was the first time Ves put his efforts into absorbing as much knowledge as possible, and his reading and comprehension speed astounded him. He browsed through the pages of his textbooks with such speed that he already flipped to the next page while he read the current one.

Before he ingested the Transcendence Pill, he was like a slow transport. After he took it, he turned into a blazing fast corvette.

"The difference is like night and day. There's no comparison!"

The boost in Intelligence hadn't made him any wiser, but it had certainly transformed his several cognitive functions that manifested fully when it came to learning new knowledge. His brains basically turned into an organic processor that could rapidly memorize, process and understand anything he came across.

Ves became increasingly proficient in Computer Science, to the point where he had long gone past the Incompetent tier.

That said no one would ever become proficient in hacking just by reading a few books. As much as Ves absorbed a university degree's worth of knowledge, he hadn't fully mastered what he learned.

"It's like learning how to play an instrument by reading a book. As much as I'm familiar with the theories, I'm still missing some elements."

Ves did not set out to learn how to program and how to hack mechs on his own. He only wanted to gain a solid foothold into this field so he could

somewhat understand what other hackers tried to pull off under his supervision.

"Besides, it's not like this knowledge will go to waste. I can leverage what I've learned to all of my future work."

Still, as much as Ves saw the potential in mastering the software side of mechs, he felt absolutely no affinity for this field. The more he delved into this topic, the more he got the sense he was beginning to go astray.

This caused him to pause his learning for a bit. He struggled to understand why some part of his personality meshed so poorly with his latest area of interest.

"Is it... because it clashes with my values?"

He could find no other answer that made sense. Programming was barely tolerable to him, but the topic of hacking really sang a discordant tone to the rest of his mind. The more he immersed himself in the many ways in which he could manipulate a mech down to its very root, the deeper his unconscious repulsion for the idea.

"This is... not compatible with my design philosophy!"

It all came down to his core ideology concerning mechs. He long believed that mechs weren't lifeless machines and shouldn't be treated as disposable commodities. Every mech held the potential for life, and they should be treated more akin to individuals than pure products.

Ves might not have completely formed his design philosophy, but he definitely knew the direction it was heading in. All in all, he believed that even the shabbiest mechs deserved a basic measure of respect.

Yet despite his beliefs, he hadn't truly fleshed out the nebulous concept of life. He always thought of it in an abstract fashion, which wasn't wrong in itself, but only scratched the surface of what this contentious word really meant.

Some people believed that bots fell into the definition of life. Even the stupidest cleaning bots possessed some form of autonomy, and even if they couldn't propagate by themselves, neither could many other organisms such as certain castes of ants or bees.

Yet even if a radicalist tried to argue that bots should be regarded as living beings and thus deserve the same rights as animals or humans, nobody would entertain such a whacky idea. Even the best AIs developed by experts that could pass most of the sentience tests eventually became stumped when it came to highly illogical subjects such as love, art, culture and faith.

Thus, society found it acceptable to treat bots and AIs as objects instead of actual life. Ves wouldn't shed a tear if a malfunctioning AI needed some readjustment, because in the end they served as tools for humanity.

The same couldn't be said for human beings. Through countless of examples throughout the Age of Conquest, humanity gained a deep abhorrence to any attempts at trying to program the human mind. Many forbidden technologies developed by heretical organizations such as the Five Scrolls Compact became masters in subverting the minds of anyone who fell into their grasp.

The vast majority of society deeply rejected these kinds of methods. Humanity had developed into one of the overlords of the galaxy, and through this growth their collective pride in their own being had grown.

"Every human is precious. No human life should be belittled."

This thought became the unofficial motto of the Age of Mechs. Heralded as a principal reaction to the massive amounts of destruction and sheer disregard

for the value of human lives, the principle that life should be valued became one of the most accepted principles in human space.

Due to this universal thought, any incidences of brainwashing, slavery and excessive slaughter of humans received near-universal condemnation. Even the most tyrannical and poorly-run states tried their best not to cross these red lines, if only to deny their rivals a casus belli to justify a war against them as well as get the MTA and CFA off their backs.

"When you think about it, hacking a mech is sort of messing with their minds."

Even if it was limited to bypassing their locks to allow other mech pilots to use them, it still represented a violation of a mech's personal sovereignty. This may be why he felt an unconscious repulsion for the entire concept of hacking mechs.

"It's not a good idea for me to delve in this field any further. Not until I figure out how far I can go without compromising my design philosophy."

He didn't feel too bummed out with this unexpected limitation. Besides the Polymath, no mech designer chose to master every field. Ves had already set his priorities on which fields he wanted to develop, and hacking simply didn't fall into his list of priorities. He wasn't any worse off than before.

Above all else, this realization aided his understanding of design philosophies. They were more than a set of opinions. They guided the principles mech designers set forth through their work.

The best way for Ves to describe it would be to call it the overarching vision of a mech designer. It worked on a higher level than the mech-specific visions Ves established at the start of every design project.

"I see now! I get it!"

From this understanding, Ves faintly sensed that a couple of gears had been turned in his mind. He couldn't help but believe that he had taken one step closer to advancing towards a Journeyman Mech Designer.

Would he be able to reach that rank before the end of the war?

"Who am I kidding. I'm still years away from reaching that rank."

Ves spent the rest of his time trying to consolidate what he learned up until some of the Vandals returned to the base with hostages in hand.

"Mr. Larkinson! Your hackers are here!"

Ves immediately pulled himself out of the Clifford Society's virtual portal and strolled out with his helmet floating behind him. He didn't need to wear the helmet at the moment, but he didn't think it was safe enough to shed his light combat armor. Most of the other Vandals still wore their hazard suits or some other pieces of armor they scrounged from the base.

Kneeling down with their hands over their heads, around two-dozen prisoners whimpered and remained cowed as couple of Vandal soldiers stood over them. All of them had their wrists tied together and more than half of them sported ugly bruises on their faces and bodies.

"Please, let us go!"

"Don't kill us! We hate Lord Javier as well!"

"My child is sick! She needs her medicine!"

Ves frowned at the noise. Though a small part of him sympathised with the civilians, a greater part of his mind reminded himself that Captain Orfan's group wouldn't be able to do anything without making use of these prisoners.

"Take them away." Ves waved his hand away as if he pushed away some trash. "I'm sure this base has a holding cell or something."

The armored, gun-toting Vandals kicked and cajoled their prisoners away from the mech stables, saving Ves from their annoying pleas. He looked at the three Vesian prisoners that remained. The two men and one woman appeared to be in the upper commoner class. Though that didn't make them nobles, they would have certainly enjoyed a lot of status on Detemen IV.

"Are these the Vesian hackers?"

"Yes, Mr. Larkinson. They are placed in your custody. You can do anything you want to them."

"Good." Ves smiled.

Things were picking up now. He looked at each of the three prisoners and saw that all of them looked to be in their thirties or thereabouts. Right now, their expressions looked awful. Each of them had seen how the ruthless Vandals captured their family members and treated them with rough hands. Fear and worry suffused their minds.

Ves nodded in satisfaction when he saw their fear. He took no pleasure in their suffering, but he wanted them worried enough that they wouldn't think of pulling something off.

He stepped forward, letting his armored boots clank against the deck of the mech stables. This caught their attention.

"Welcome to the makeshift headquarters of Captain Orfan from the 6th Flagrant Vandals. It's kind of a mess right now. It would be much cleaner here if we can get all of these mechs out. That's where you come in. I need you to put your hacking expertise to use and unlock these mechs so that the Vandals can make full use of them. Refusal is not an option."

The three prisoners looked at Ves as if he was a devil. "W-W-Will you let my family go?"

"Sure." Ves whipped his hand dismissively. "We'll have to keep you until the end of our deployment on Detemen IV, but yes, if you do what you are told, you can leave with your families after this is over."

Perhaps coming from him this might not have been much of a carrot, but the stick was big enough to force them into compliance anyway. The three hackers unanimously agreed to hack the mechs under his supervision.

"Ah, we don't have our tools. Without our special computers, it's going to be four times as hard to break into these mechs!"

"We don't have enough time to retrieve your equipment. Make do with what you have." Ves answered instantly.

Ves had already prepared some computer terminals for them. He also made sure to disconnect them from every other network. He wasn't too assured with disabling their connectivity from the operating system, so he took the extra step of opening up the gadgets and physically disabling the components that allowed it to connect with any networks.

The only way these terminals could interact with other machines was through hardline cables.

"We can't work as well without our hacking software. I need to download my software suite from the galactic net."

"No!" Ves rejected in an even stronger this time. "We won't risk you pulling something off on the galactic net. I know that mechs can still be hacked with a basic terminal, so don't give me any excuses. You work with the tools we've given you and nothing more."

Though it certainly crippled the capabilities of these hackers, Ves and the Vandals simply couldn't afford letting these Vesian hackers run out of control.

Thus, under gunpoint and under coercion, the kidnapped hackers proceeded to cobble up their own tools as they discussed how to hack the mechs. Ves stood quietly behind the three and listened on. While he couldn't completely follow their thread of conversation, with the help of his newly acquired knowledge he understood enough to know if they did their jobs in earnest or tried to slip in something bad.

After two hours, the hackers unlocked their first mech.

#### Chapter 473 Moral Exten

The former abode of Javier's Dastardly Handsome Bastards became much livelier once they subverted the locked mechs. Once the hackers got the hang of intruding into one particular mech, they applied the same solution to every other mech from the same model line, leading to a lot of time savings.

"Good work Mr. Larkinson!" Captain Orfan said as she came down to the mech stables to see the results for herself. "What is your progress so far?"

"I prioritized getting the remaining bestial mechs to work, knowing that your mech pilots need some time to adjust themselves to their control schemes. After that, I began to unlock the lightest mechs. They're cheaper and their security suites aren't as tight as those on the more powerful mechs. Right now, we've brought nine out of sixteen undamaged mechs out of their slumber. Sadly, the mechs after this will be tough nuts to crack, captain."

Ves kept his eyes glued to the panels projected in front of the three hackers. Not even once did he look away. He couldn't afford to miss anything should they try to pull something off.

Captain Orfan looked on as some of the Vandal mech pilots that had answered her rallying call over the day enter the cockpits of their mechs. Soon, those mechs would be out on the streets.

"The Dastardly Handsome Bastards have left some damaged mechs behind from our fight to take over their base. Is it possible for you to bring those mechs in working condition as well?"

"I'll see what I can do ma'am, but from the condition of those mechs, you really did a number on them. Proper repairs will take days."

"That's out of the question. We'll be departing from the surface in less than two days, perhaps even sooner. I need an extra mech up today!"

The pressure piled up on Ves, who winced from the unreasonable order. "I can't make any promises, ma'am, but perhaps I can jury-rig a mech together in a hurry. It won't perform up to standard, mind you."

"That's okay. Right now, we need as much mechs on their feet as possible. Having even a partially functional mech at our disposal is a significant to us because we can leave it to guard this base while the combat capable mechs are free to roam the streets of Neron City."

He understood now. Captain Orfan didn't want to bring a mech online to fight against other mechs. She merely wanted something that looked big and scary enough to deter any troublemakers from approaching this occupied base.

"Is it bad out there, ma'am?"

The Vandal captain released a tired breath. "It's twice as bad as last night. Everyone is awake now, and at least a third of them can't sit still in their homes. Some are joining the riots, others are fed up and are banding together to fight against them, while more have gone mad entirely."

With the Vandals visibly present in some portions of Neron City, the capital city became a complete madhouse. This otherwise prosperous and beautiful city became a focal point of death and suffering due to the unexpected arrival of the Vandals and the sheer incompetence of Lord Javier.

Any planetary administrator wouldn't have led his people turn against themselves so suddenly. What happened out on the streets spoke much about Lord Javier's ability to lead and inspire the citizens of Detemen IV.

"Leaving a half-operational mech as our only guard is kind of sketchy." Ves remarked. "I'm not questioning your judgement, ma'am, but who knows what the Vesians will do when they find out about our presence. Besides the police and House Eneqqin's household troops, there's also the gangs and mercenaries to contend with. They haven't shown up with their mechs so far, but that might change in the future."

Captain Orfan crossed her arms and looked on with a resolute gaze. "If it's a choice between putting more mechs out on the streets or keeping them holed up in our base, I would chose the former any day. We don't have enough mechs and mech pilots to spare. Finding Lord Javier goes beyond our safety."

Ves hoped it didn't come to that, but evidently the Vandals truly pushed themselves into a corner. He knew that any further arguments wouldn't work.

"Very well ma'am, after these hackers finish with the intact mechs, I'll work on getting a damaged mech up and running as soon as possible."

"That's what I like to hear from you, Mr. Larkinson. If you will excuse me, I need to return to my office and plan my next moves with the main ground force."

"Ah, one more thing ma'am, how is the main battle going on?"

Orfan smirked. "We suffered a bit by losing those combat carriers, but the Vesians have truly pissed us off. Major Verle survived the destruction of the Stubby Growler, and he's out for blood right now. We've initiated limited orbital bombardment on some of House Eneqqin's strongholds near the manufacturing district. Once our boys up in orbit started to pound those positions, they've begun to fall apart."

They could both hear occasional explosions and other sounds of battle off in the distance. It reminded them both that a lot of Vandals fought hard to reach the same city that they already entered.

"Will we be able to control the city after the main force breaks through?"

"Not as such." Orfan shook her head. "As impressive as our numbers might be, this city is too big for a couple of hundred mechs to exert complete control. We can only concentrate our forces on a couple of districts if we want to maintain complete control."

"I see."

Captain Orfan departed the mech stables after they finished their discussion. Ves wondered if she would pilot one of the recovered mechs herself. He imagined that she would feel far more comfortable to be out on the streets rather than to remain in base.

As the three hackers started to get familiar with each other's capabilities, their ability to intrude into the mechs improved. However, because the mechs that remained locked possessed tighter locks, those time savings became swept up in the many obstacles in their way.

It took a lot of struggle to get a couple more mechs back online. While Ves still supervised their work, he also diverted his attention to supervising the repair process of one of the damaged mechs. He opened a schematic of the least-damaged mech and figured out a couple of improvisations that would patch up the mech just enough to be able to walk around.

"What do we do with the knee joints?" A mech technician asked besides Ves. "When Captain Orfan's troopers invaded this base, they did a real number on that knee joint. It's a total loss and none of us are skilled enough to fabricate and install a replacement mechanism."

"A mech doesn't need a functioning knee to move around." Ves stated. "It's sufficient to fuse the lower leg with the upper leg. Don't aim for perfect mobility. Just restore the limb so that the mech can put its weight on it without collapsing. Can you do that?"

A light lit up in the mech technician's eyes. "I'll get on that, sir!"

Ves introduced a couple more solutions in that vein to the technicians, all the while keeping his eyes on his repair schematic and the work panels of the three hackers.

An ordinary human wouldn't have been able to perform so many actions at once. Even if someone received a couple of gene boosts, they would still be hard-pressed to divide their attention without slipping up.

Perhaps one of the Vesian hackers underestimated Ves and counted on that, because for a split second he uploaded a tiny script to the mech that the hackers worked on.

Ves hadn't even noticed how this hacker composed this script under his nose, but he nonetheless caught the hacker uploading something completely unknown to the mech. This script could do anything from broadcasting the location of the mech to the Vesians to timing a forced shutdown in the middle of the battle!

Safe to say, whatever the script entailed, the hacker was definitely up to no good!

"Halt!" Ves called out. He winked out the projection of the repair project and pushed the mech technician aside. "Troops, pull the hackers back!"

The armored troops that stood guard over the Vesians immediately dragged them back by the scruff of their necks. They squealed and complained, but Ves was deaf to their pleas. His gaze landed on the Vesian to the left. The man looked at Ves with shaking eyes.

"You!" Ves pointed at the man. "You just uploaded a script to the mech. What is it?"

"I.. ah.. It's nothing, I just wanted to test its second layer of verification by throwing a bunch of test data at it. There's nothing more!"

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrows. "Don't talk nonsense to me. I haven't seen you program this script, and I doubt it showed up on your terminal out of the blue. Show me the script!"

Under the looming presence of Ves, the pathetic hacker shrank back. "It's gone! It's already set to delete itself in the event of failure!"

Ves stepped forward until he practically towered over the guy. The other two hackers to the side watched on with growing horror as their fellow captive became increasingly nervous.

Even they could see the guilt affecting their colleague.

"What have you done?"

"Nothing!"

"Wrong answer!" Ves yelled and slapped the man's cheek bloody with his armored gauntlet. "Can you revert what you have just done?"

"No! I can't!"

This time, Ves kicked out with his armored boot, causing the man to fling backwards and crack his ribs. Practically everyone in the mech stables gaped at his violent outburst.

No one said anything. Ves was in charge around here.

In truth, Ves didn't know what to do. The script potentially compromised a mech that the Vandals hoped to use. At its current state, who knew what might go wrong with this machine. Without beating the answer out of this

rebellious hacker, Ves wasn't confident enough to release the mech in question to the Vandals.

"Trooper."

"Yes, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Take this waste of space to the cells. Tell the guards there to interrogate him on what he did. I'll send a report with the details through my comm soon, so they'll know what to ask. Make sure to tell them to hurry up because we don't have much time left on this planet. Tell them to go to any lengths if necessary, decency be damned."

"On it, sir. I'll convey your words to the cell guards."

For a moment, Ves thought about beating the answer out of the hacker himself, but he figured the Vandals possessed a lot more expertise in that area. If he tried to interrogate the man himself, they might never get an answer before their time on Detemen IV was up.

Ves also didn't want to sully his combat armor with the Vesian's blood.

As the trooper dragged the wheezing prisoner away, Ves turned to the two remaining hackers. Missing one of their number set back their hacking progress by a lot. He could ill afford another incident.

"As you've just seen, I know a thing or two about what you are doing. As I've said before, don't pull anything off that isn't directly related to opening up these machines. Now get back to work!"

"Y-Y-Yes sir!"

Ves didn't ask to be part of the Flagrant Vandals. Neither did he wish to be ejected from a pulverized ship and crash-land on a hostile planet. He was willing to do almost anything anything to get away from this cesspool of a planet.

"How far am I willing to go?"

The spontaneous question disturbed him a bit, because he felt apprehensive at the thought of answering it. He suspected that the answer wouldn't make him very glad.

#### Chapter 474 Compromised

The offending hacker never returned. Ves imagined that the interrogation hadn't managed to cough up the answers they needed.

"Why did he sabotage us?"

The Vandals made sure to grab his family members as well, so the man staked not only his own life, but everyone else he cared about as well. From what Ves had seen from his brief encounter with the family, they didn't appear to be a dysfunctional family either.

What brought a Vesian to risk damnation to everyone he cared about? Was it worth it to spite the Flagrant Vandals?

"I don't understand."

Was the hacker a patriot? Did he truly hold so much loyalty to his state that he didn't hesitate to risk everything he held dear?

"It's so stupid."

Perhaps he shared some of the blame as well. Though he kept a fairly keen eye on their actions, to the hackers it appeared that Ves only barely paid attention to them with his multitasking. If they thought they could get away with something, then his own behavior only encouraged them to go through.

In the end, nobody won. The hacker and his family would surely suffer a miserable fate because they directly crossed the Vandals. Captain Orfan couldn't afford to be lenient in this regard, not if they wanted to keep the two surviving hackers in line.

The Vandals also suffered a setback due to the uncertain condition of the mech in question. It happened to be a powerhouse of a knight mech, one of the few in the stables of the Dastardly Handsome Bastards that could endure a beating.

Every other mech of the former mercenary group served offensive or support roles, so they dearly needed a solid knight to protect their backline.

"Can this mech be recovered?"

Ves investigated it for a time, but quickly figured out that it possessed one of the most advanced security suites of the mechs in their possession. The knight mech must be one of the prestige mechs of the Bastards for it to be so stuffed with security measures.

"Damnit. That hacker must have bided his time until he began to work on this mech."

Captain Orfan and her band of shipwrecked Vandals already ran a threadbare operation in Neron City. The loss of a single mech severely impacted their chances to survive and complete their objectives. The amount of restraint they needed to adopt alone would set them back by as much as half.

Yet what could they do? Ves couldn't trust the remaining two Vesian hackers in their grasp and neither did he possess the ability to reverse the afflicted mech's condition.

In the end, Ves decided to punt the decision to the woman in charge. As soon as he contacted Captain Orfan through his comm, the woman looked back with a serious expression.

"I am already aware of what transpired. These Vesian slimes are willing to do everything they can to ingratiate themselves with the nobles. The hacker holed up in our holding cell must have thought to buy Lord Javier's favor. Hmph! He won't be receiving a good end, I can promise you that."

Ves brushed the fate of the hacker aside. He could care less about that worm right now. "That still leaves the question on what to do with the mech in question, ma'am. I'd hate to leave a knight mech unused, but in my professional judgement the risks of deploying it are substantial."

The script that the hacker had slipped in only contained a few lines of code, but they might have activated some traps embedded in the knight mech's programming. It could be anything from shutting off the mech in the middle of a pitched battle to breaching the containment around the cockpit and dumping loads of waste heat inside.

Certain mech designers liked to employ such traps in their mechs and offer them to the market as security features.

With the amazing amount of power and value associated with mechs, theft was an unavoidable fact of life. The amount of potentates willing to make a living by stealing mechs instead of piloting them in battle was quite a lot, and over hundreds of years they became rather inventive in their methods.

Security suites kept pace as well of course. When Ves licenced a cockpit production license, it already came with an appropriate security suite. Since the cockpit models he selected for the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord designs fell into the premium range, Ves had never heard of someone managing to steal them from their rightful owners.

Yet.

There would always be freaks and genius hacking teams that could accomplish the impossible. To deter these threats, mechs sometimes incorporated a couple of hidden self-sabotage measures that would spring their traps at the right time.

Ves himself never thought about using such inane methods because he didn't care too much about in whose hands his mechs ended up with after his company sold them off for the first time.

The mech designer of the knight mech in front of him thought otherwise. This person must have been a rather vindictive fellow, because its multi-layered security was replete with traps and other obstacles. It took the two remaining hackers a lot of effort to get past the final locks.

"The risks of taking the knight mech along our deployments is too great." Orfan eventually decided. "Yet it's a shame to keep it in the stables. Tell you what. I'll allow it to be brought online, but assign the mech to guard this base. The damage it could do to our other mechs will be kept to a minimum."

That safeguarded the Vandal mechs deployed on the streets, but opened the door to other risks inside the base.

Ves did not know whether to feel comfortable with this solution, because the fallout of a compromised mech might spill out to the rest of the base. Still, it wasn't as if they had any choice.

"Let's do that then."

A mech pilot came to wake the dubious mech up. Nothing strange happened at the start, so the sabotage didn't go into effect at once. Ves read the telemetry transmitted by the mech but couldn't spot any anomalies either. In the end, he gave up trying to figure out the consequences and let the mech take up its guard duty.

"Alright, get back to work!" Ves yelled at the Vesian hackers. "There are still several more mechs to go!"

It took a long time to get the handful of remaining mechs to unlock. Night had fallen by the time the mech stables became empty. The only untouched

mechs that remained consisted of a handful of damaged mechs that the Vandals had somehow taken out in the process of conquering this base.

They didn't have enough time to bring them all online. Ves hounded the hackers past their exhaustion and forced them to unlock the one mech which the mech technicians labored to restore to limited functionality.

Its lame leg might not provide the damaged mech with a lot of mobility, but when it came to standing guard, its crippled limb didn't pose much of a hindrance.

"This is all I can do for now."

Both the mech technicians and the hackers worked in a neverending shift. While Ves himself felt he could go on for an entire week, the others only possessed a limited physique. Pushing them on was out of the question.

"You can rest now."

The mech technicians sighed and dragged their weary bodies out of the mech stables. Troopers carried the prisoners back to their cells. Hardly anything of value remained in the empty mech stables.

Ves didn't feel like sleeping now, so he stood on a lifter platform and ordered it to bring him up to the roof of the stables. He sat down on its surface and looked out towards Neron City's skyline at night.

From the din over the city, he determined that most of the riots had petered out. Right now, this was the time when mechs came to the fore. With their advanced sensors, they encountered no hindrance when they fought during the night.

A staccato of explosions, collisions and collapsing structures constantly sounded out in the distance. Even if the Vandals managed to break House

Eneqqin's household troops, that still left plenty of opposition in the manufacturing district and the city proper.

The government may have fallen back, but the private sector still had some teeth left into them. It was a shame that they would never lift a finger to help each other out. Most of the fighting that he could hear from the distance must have come from the Vandals defeating each private sector outfit in a piecemeal fashion.

Again, this was another sign that Lord Javier fell short. A unifying leader should have been able to call up every mech in Neron City no matter who they owed their allegiance to and form them into dedicated defense units.

"That hasn't happened, though."

Instead, Lord Javier went underground as soon as the Vandal fleet arrived in his star system. The noble descendant of a powerful count completely disgraced himself and never hesitated in throwing away a substantial amount of his defense force at slowing down the Vandals.

Many Vesian mech pilots lost their lives against the Vandals. All of them had been nurtured by House Eneqqin at a significant cost. Loyalty couldn't be bought at an instant. It could only be nurtured over time.

Losing these mechs and men certainly affected House Eneqqin's overall strength. The disaster happening in the Detemen System already affected their prestige in many ways.

Obvious to all, Lord Javier failed to step up and showed the Vesia Kingdom what a noble was made of. He disgraced his House and his father who put him in charge.

Let alone the count, the Duchess of Imodris herself must feel awfully pissed at his actions.

"Still, chances are he'll make it out alive."

Right or wrong, Lord Javier picked the option with the highest chance of survival for himself. Even if the rebels and the Vandals made a concerted effort in scouring the palace and its surroundings, Neron City was simply too big to find someone who wanted to hide.

Ves gazed out at the city and wondered what the Vandals would do. They only had one day left before they needed to depart the system.

"Even if the Vesians are a little tardy, reinforcements shouldn't be too far away."

Ves heard a couple of sounds of fighting in the distance. Another conflict heated up, insuring that this would be a sleepless night for many.

As Ves considered whether to turn in for the night or do some extra work, he spotted something in the distance. A loud sound of something massive being launched brushed past his ears.

"Huh?"

Instinctively, he looked up, and saw some faint reflections arcing in the sky. It fell directly towards the base that used to be owned by the Dastardly Handsome Bastards.

His eyes widened as the explosive shell landed on one of the base's administrative buildings.

**BOOOM!**

The nearby explosion rocked Ves off his butt and bounced him backwards on the roof. He didn't care about his sorry state but tried to scramble up to his feet. He ran back towards the side and looked at the impact site in horror.

The office building hadn't been built with defense in mind. Though it was resistant to incidental damage from mechs, it had never been built to

withstand a direct artillery shell. Base turrets should have intercepted such attacks, but the Vandals already destroyed them when they took over the base.

Alarms rang out throughout the entire base, and much of the Vandals started to move.

"Incoming mechs!"

"Evacuate the remaining structures! Take the underground escape tunnels!"

Ves cursed as he spotted a second shell arcing down towards the base. This time, the explosive payload seemed to be aiming straight at the mech stables.

"I gotta go!" He hurried onto his floater platform and tried to urge the sluggish device to bring him away from the roof. He also grabbed his floating helmet and slammed it onto his head, just in time for the shell to land and explode against the roof of the mech stables.

This time, the blast almost engulfed Ves as he desperately rode his floater platform to safety. The fragile device instantly crumpled, leaving Ves to lose his only support in the air.

His armored body started to fall.

#### **Chapter 475 Without Direction**

The awful thing about the long-ranged artillery bombardment was that the Vandals lacked the means to stop it. The two mechs that guarded the base might as well be decoration for their complete inability to stop the artillery bombardment or chase down the artillery mech responsible for targeting their base.

While the first shell pulverized the office building in an instant, at least not a lot of Vandals should have been working there at this time. After Ves brought the last mechs online, Captain Orfan and some other mech pilots entered their cockpits and marched into the streets of Neron City.

The mech stables also turned into an empty shell. Ves dismissed most of the mech technicians, so besides some stragglers, not a lot of people got hurt.

That didn't reassure Ves very much though, because he stupidly took a break on the roof. Now, with the second shell detonating on the roof, his body fell in the air and dropped several stories down until his armored form crashed against the ground.

"AH!"

His light combat armor only offered a limited amount of protection to the fall. The suit played a very minimal in mitigating the impact, thereby causing Ves to take the brunt of damage.

"It hurts!"

Even as Ves cried out in pain, the damage wasn't as bad as he expected. His extremely sturdy body hadn't broken any bones as far as he was aware of. He just felt enormously bruised from the hard fall.

A third shell landed in the base, this time targeting the barracks. A couple of sleepy Vandals had woken up from the first two detonations and evacuated from the structure, but not everyone got away in time.

"Abandon everything and escape through the tunnels!" Lieutenant Burke broadcasted over everyone's comm. "If we get separated, rendez-vous at Point Theta if you can!"

Some of the Vandals ran around like headless chickens, but once everyone became reminded of the evacuation tunnels, they poured towards the underground entrance.

Nobody thought about defending their position. It held no more value now that they managed to bring all of the intact mechs stationed back online. The

Vandals wouldn't stick around long enough to use the base as a supply point anyway so no mech needed to return.

Simply put, the base had served its use and turned into deadweight. If Ves looked at it in a more cynical fashion, then he might even argue that Captain Orfan only cared about the mechs. Once she got her toys, she heartlessly cast off the support personnel with a token defense force.

"If Captain Orfan arranged more defenses, we wouldn't have ended up in such a sorry state!" Ves muttered as he scrambled to his feet and hurried in the direction of the tunnels. His scuffed and bent combat armor creaked as he moved. "Who's bombarding us anyway?!"

In general, only the larger private outfits or government forces employed artillery mechs, and only under a limited amount of circumstances. Resorting to explosive shells in a city came with lots of repercussions.

He also couldn't figure out who would target the base. Was it the government, or a private sector outfit? Why did they target a base with very limited utility to the Vandals?

Ves found no answers to his question. In the end, too many things happened outside of his purview. He had no idea what Captain Orfan was up to and why she had been so insistent in putting as much mechs on the streets as possible.

He didn't think about it anymore as he entered the protective embrace of the underground tunnels.

As far as tunnels went, the ones dug up by the Dastardly Handsome Bastards didn't go that far underground. Instead, it connected to a network of tunnels shared by a number of neighboring facilities. This spread around the cost and allowed multiple organizations to make use of the same tunnels.

Of course, breaking into a facility from an underground entrance was wouldn't be easy. The single point of entry allowed many facilities to erect a lot of defenses at their emergency exits, so no Vandal thought about breaking into them. Instead, they marched forth until they couldn't go any further.

"Go up!"

They entered a sloping tunnel that slowly brought them back up to the surface. By the time the survivors poked their heads above the ground, they had reached a fair distance away from the ruined base.

Lieutenant Burke counted the survivors and pressed her lips. "Only twenty-three of us present here."

Perhaps some other Vandals evacuated through some other routes, but they would have ended up far away from her group.

Their abilities differed substantially as well. While they didn't have any mech pilots on hand, around half of her group consisted of mech technicians. Others knew their way around with weapons, and they even got the two exo-skeleton suited soldiers with them, whose presence managed to reassure everyone.

"It doesn't look good, men." The lieutenant said. "We ran with nothing but our clothes on our backs. Some of you are armed, but over half of us are empty-handed. We also lost our communication lines with Captain Orfan, the rebels and the main Vandal force. As far as I'm aware of, we are on our own."

Ves raised his hand. "Can't we contact the Vandals through the galactic net?"

"Out of the question!" Burke sternly rebuked him. "Communicating through the networks of our enemy is sheer folly. Even if we bypass the access points around us and track down the location of a quantum entanglement node, we'll still be exposing our communications because the other pair of the node is in the grasp of the Vesians. They'll be able to read everything we say."

"What's the plan, then?"

The lieutenant frowned even deeper. She scratched her chin as she fell into a somewhat indecisive state. Most of the Vandals present looked at her for hope. As the highest ranking officer in their midst, everyone relied on her to get them out of this fix.

"We should make our way to the main force of the Vandals. We'll have to cross at least half the city to do that, so the first thing we need to do is to procure some vehicles."

"We need more arms as well! We shouldn't rely on our tin cans to protect us in our stead."

"Good idea. We'll raid a weapon stockpile along the way if we can, but our highest priority is to obtain secure vehicles."

That was easy to say, but most of the vehicles that should have been buzzing in the air of Neron City had disappeared. They'd need to break in somewhere to get their hands on some sturdy vehicles.

Not any aircar would do. Preferably, they could get a hold of something that could survive a couple of missile impacts.

Lieutenant Burke opened up a projection that depicted a map of Neron City. She pointed out their current location. "As you can see, we're situated in a middle-class district with lots of small enterprises. I think we can grab what we want if we target some of the neighboring facilities."

Someone objected to the suggestion. Burke pointed at a tall and burly mech technician. "Lieutenant, don't forget our assailants are still at large. They could be trying to track us down right now."

"I understand your position, but I won't change my orders. We're in no shape to leave this district and enter the downtown area on foot. It's far too dangerous out there."

Lieutenant Burke studied the map and tried to find the nearest facility that could potentially supply them with their survival needs.

Ves looked on to the side and studied the same map. Different from his own map, Burke's version contained the last-known locations of Captain Orfan's mechs.

It turned out that they went straight downtown towards the palace district. They arrived there first in fact and clashed a bit with some of House Eneqqin's mechs before they linked up with the rebels forces that occupied the recently-abandoned palace.

Ves would need to cross several kilometers over some of the most chaotic districts if he wanted to reach the palace. He would be better off if he took a detour and reached the manufacturing district where he could finally return to the protective embrace of the Vandals.

Sadly, Lieutenant Burke had other plans in mind. "The way I see it, Lord Javier shouldn't have fled so far. Our invasion completely took him by surprise. If he's hiding somewhere in Neron City, he shouldn't have been able to reach the outer districts without tipping someone off. His likeliest hiding spot should be around the palace."

"Captain Orfan and much of the rebels are already searching there." Ves interjected. "Our presence there won't contribute to the search. We'll just be weighing down our own mechs."

Many of the mech technicians quietly nodded. They knew how dangerous it was for exposed human beings to survive around mechs as they fought. The potential for collateral damage was extremely high.

"Need I remind you, Mr. Larkinson, you are not in charge around here. Strictly speaking, you're a researcher. You hold no rank over us, so stand back and let us worry about your safety."

If Ves wasn't mistaken, Lieutenant Burke still held a bit of a grudge against him over the argument on kidnapping the hackers. It hadn't reached the point of affecting her professionalism, but she firmly refused to listen to his suggestions.

"Fair enough, lieutenant." Ves shrugged, conceding the point. It might not be such a bad thing for her to be the leader, as he wasn't quite a leader himself. Though Burke looked a little young for the job, she did her best to step up and enact her responsibilities as an officer of the Mech Corps.

"Our target is this facility here. It's twenty minutes away on foot, and there shouldn't be any dangerous elements along the way."

Lieutenant Burke increased the size of her projection, allowing everyone to see the facility in question.

"It's an intercity aircar depot!"

"Exactly, and a small one at that. While most of its vehicles consist of fragile civilian aircars, the depot also stores several armored shuttles for when they need to transport VIPs or sensitive goods. This is exactly what we need to obtain right now."

"What about weapons, ma'am?"

"It's unlikely the depot holds more than a couple of gun lockers. The company that operates this aircar depot never shoots back at its assailants."

If they tried to break into the aircar depot, their route wouldn't take them anywhere close to a company that might maintain an armory of weapons.

A lot of the Vandals present looked disappointed. They felt naked without a gun in their hands. Though they were willing to entrust their safety to the two exo-skeleton soldiers, they still felt ill at ease.

This was reality though. Lieutenant Burke refused to take a detour to rob a weapons cache. Time was of the essence, and they couldn't afford to linger in this district.

Burke looked at each of the men and women under her lead. "Don't forget that we have one more day until our welcome is worn out. We have to do our best to find Lord Javier. Who knows if our presence may provide a breakthrough in narrowing down their whereabouts. Let's go!"

They marched forth in a loose and spread formation. One of the exo-skeleton soldiers walked way ahead in order to scout the way for the main body. Other Vandals with soldiering experience hopped from cover to cover, trying to minimize their exposure.

An attack could come from any direction. The Vandals mostly feared the windows and rooftops to either side of the street. Though their sensors cleared these sites of threats, these devices could still be fooled.

Ves walked in the middle of their formation. As a helpless mech designer, the Vandals didn't expect him to contribute to any firefights. Obviously they hadn't found out about his Amastendiria. As long as he didn't need to pull out his weapon, Ves was fine with being mistaken as a toothless civilian.

"Halt!" The exo-skeleton soldier up ahead spoke through their channel.

"Enemy ahead! One light mech patrolling in our direction!"

#### **Chapter 476 Belated Realization**

The sighting of the enemy mech unsettled the Vandals under Lieutenant Burke. The woman made a gesture that forced the men and women to cut the chatter.

"Type and markings?"

The exo-skeleton soldier reported back after a few seconds. "Cat-like bestial mech, no ranged hardpoints. It's coated in astral blue and silver with a prominent emblem of House Eneqqin."

A couple of Vandals quietly cursed while Lieutenant Burke started to frown.

"Strange. House Eneqqin should be directing all of their mechs to stop the main force. Why did one of their mechs stray to this part of town?"

Ves widened his eyes. "There's a high possibility that it's a scout mech! Be careful, its sensors are powerful enough to detect an exoskeleton suit from a distance!"

A loud, primal growl suddenly thundered over their heads!

"It detected my presence!"

"RUN! That's an order!"

The thunderous steps of the four-legged mech echoed throughout the streets as the beast in metal skin rapidly surged towards the hapless exoskeleton soldier.

Ves heard distance weapons fire being discharged. The heavy rifles wielded by these soldiers possessed enough punch to chew apart a small vehicle, but against a mech, it must have been nothing more than a pinprick.

He could guess the outcome of the clash before its conclusion. With a distant crunch, the weapons fire ceased and the mech let out another artificial roar.

The Vandals hadn't been standing still all this while. Under the lieutenant's urging, they ran towards the nearest tunnel entrance that she marked out beforehand.

In the meantime, the mech started moving again. The echoes of its steps rang louder and louder.

"It's heading straight for us!"

"How did it know how to find us?!"

"Johnson! Is your anti-observation gear still working!?"

"It's still working fine! There's no microbugs in the vicinity!"

"Don't forget that this is House Eneqqin's home turf! They must have embedded bugs resistant to anti-observation fields into the streets."

The theory was sound, but Ves started to doubt that conclusion. In any modern city in this age, the authorities littered the public spaces with all manner of sensors and observation gear.

However, the quality of these sensors only extended to how much their owners were willing to invest in them. In the galactic rim, most authorities only utilized the most basic and affordable sensors. They were cheap and easy to maintain, but came at the cost of being very easy to manipulate.

Anyone with means would be able to get their hands on software or devices that could hack, block, interfere, disable or even outright destroy these sensors. That was why crime and shady dealings still proliferated in the Komodo Star Sector. The ability to circumvent observation was too ubiquitous.

Naturally, not every method of observation could be stopped so easily. Enough investment allowed them to be resilient enough to withstand the most conventional means of blocking them out.

However, even if that was the case, the Vandals didn't use run-of-the-mill countermeasures. One of the Vandals in a hazard suit carried a big anti-observation backpack module. It didn't quite provide them with total stealth,

but it somehow disabled several of the most common means of observation in the vicinity.

It actually worked quite similar to the Privacy Shield in his old comm, but it was a lot bigger and cruder.

With such a device in their midst, chances should have been low that House Eneqqin detected them, but somehow that wasn't true. Were these streets so important that the authorities installed much more effective means of observations, or had the Vandals slipped up somehow?

Ves thought back on how the former base of the Dastardly Handsome Bastards suffered from an artillery bombardment out of the blue. The kind of mechs that can lob those kinds of heavy explosive shells shouldn't have been very common. House Eneqqin absolutely couldn't afford to divert one of them from the battle with the main Vandal ground force.

Yet they did so anyway against all common sense. Even if the Vandal ground force eventually managed to break through the defense lines, the absence of a single artillery mech must have exacerbated House Eneqqin's defeat.

So why did they not only divert an important mech, but also managed to accurately bombard their key positions?

The Vandals had taken all kinds of precautions. They cleaned out and chased away all the occupants in the neighboring blocks. They employed powerful blockers that made it difficult for anyone to spot anything unusual about the base. If House Eneqqin wasn't specifically keeping an eye on that base, then they shouldn't have known about their presence.

Even as Ves could almost feel the mech bounding closer towards him and the fleeing Vandals, his mind finally made a possible connection.

His self-made comm!

Ves currently carried two comms. One of them was his military-issued one, which still couldn't do a lot of things, but at least it possessed an extremely high degree of security.

The same couldn't be said for his other comm, which he crafted to grant him access to the galactic net and to facilitate in hacking simple devices. As much as the black market designs for this series of comms claimed that they wouldn't leave a trace, how much could Ves believe in them? Certainly not very much, especially since he reproduced one of the cheaper designs.

He hadn't done much with the comm since he made it. His unexpected arrival at Captain Orfan's temporary hideout changed his entire planning. Instead of using his comm to hack into locked aircars and hijacking them to bring him closer to the manufacturing district, he used it to hack into some of the mechs and enter the virtual portal of the Clifford Society.

Ves briefly hung on the latter. Who on this planet would connect with the network of the Clifford Society all of a sudden while Detemen IV was burning? No average mech designer would resort to such an action. Any Vesian who kept track of the comings and goings of the galactic net would immediately investigate the unusual connection.

Dread ran through his body as Ves almost faltered in his flight. One important question dominated his mind.

"Is it my fault that House Eneqqin bombarded the base?"

The possibility existed that Ves had directly led the Vandals to their doorstep and offered them a prime opportunity to massacre a lot of Vandals at once. The enemy might even be tracking their position right now through his unsecure comm!

"I got to get rid of it!"

Ves faintly slowed down in his flight so that he fell behind the formation. He fumbled with his suit while he ran, eventually managing to open up a narrow slot that allowed him to remove his second comm from his wrist. He looked at it with a mixture of guilt and regret.

"I don't know if it's my fault, but you've got to go! Sorry!"

He crushed the comm with his armored gauntlet and scattered the pieces behind him. Almost the instant he did that, the thundering steps approaching them from behind started to slow down for a few seconds.

Then the chasing mech bounded faster as if it wanted to catch the last glimpse of whatever it pursued.

Ves had his answer. His heart sank to the bottom at the realization that his negligence had indirectly led to the deaths of tens of Vandals. Even though he sometimes questioned their loyalty and commitment to the Republic, most didn't seem all that bad. Their circumstances just dealt them a bad hand in life.

"Damnit. I can't feel sorry for myself!"

Guilty or not, the milk was already spilled. He first needed to save his life before he had the luxury to repent!

The mech that chased after them might have lost a direct trace, but scout mechs came with a lot of other means of tracking. Ves knew that its capabilities would easily allow it to track the footsteps of more than a dozen people.

Lieutenant Burke tried to lead them through narrow alleyways and cramped streets, but the scout mech always seemed to find the right detours.

"How far to the tunnels?!"

"A few hundred meters ahead! We're almost there!"

Just as they crossed an unavoidably wide street, the scout mech finally came around a corner and sighted the fleeing Vandals.

"It's approaching us!"

From what Ves gathered so far, the cat mech didn't possess any ranged weapons. That was hardly a consolation for them though because its powerful legs closed the distance at a very rapid tempo.

"We can't outrun it! Fight!"

The Vandals shot at the mech with their pistols and rifles, but none of them dealt any noticeable damage to its exterior armor. Compared to infantry, mechs fell into an entirely different category. None of their weapons possessed any chance of leaving more than a dent on the Vesian mech's armor.

"It's coming close!"

"I don't want to die!"

"For the Republic!"

At the precipice of death, the Vandals partially collapsed. Some fled in random directions while others kept firing their useless infantry guns at the nigh-impervious mech. Others looked to Lieutenant Burke for leadership, only to see that she had knelt down with her hands above her head in surrender.

"Stop shooting! Put down your arms and surrender! There's still a chance we can live through this!"

This caused half of the gunners to drop their weapons and follow suit. Unfortunately, some of their other comrades wanted to fight to the end or didn't believe the Vesian mech would show mercy. They didn't have any obligation to accept their surrender in the first place.

"Put down your guns! That's an order!" Burke yelled at the stubborn Vandals.

"If I go down on Vesian soil, I want to go down fighting!"

While the mech sprinted closer and closer with its violent steps shaking everyone's feet, Ves stood paralyzed with indecision. Out of all of the Vandals, perhaps only he possessed the means to repel the bloodthirsty mech.

His gauntlet already flexed in a grip that would allow it to grip the Amastendira should he choose to materialize it out of his Inventory. If he dialed it up to maximum power and aimed with care, he should be able to take out a leg or two from the dangerously closing mech.

While no common infantry weapon could make any dent in its armor, the Amastendira had been built for this. The light mech's armor shouldn't be able to withstand a full-powered laser beam from his powerful weapon.

Yet Ves still hesitated pulling it out. The Amastendira was his trump card and he dearly hated bringing it out. Using it upon landing was already a reckless enough action, and he didn't wish to expose it any further.

What if the Flagrant Vandals wanted to confiscate his precious weapon after the battle? Despite their many differences from a regular mech regiment of the Mech Corps, they completely inherited the control freak tendencies of their parent company. They would never allow a mech designer like Ves to hold onto such a dangerous weapon.

"I can't expose it. Not here."

Still, was this the right time to hold something back? The mech almost reached close enough to stomp the Vandals with its paws and chew apart anyone into pieces with its jaws.

"Mr. Larkinson!" Lieutenant Burke suddenly shouted at him. "Tell us where its weak points are, now!"

Her request momentarily broke Ves out of his fog. Even though his attention preoccupied itself with the decision on whether to reveal the Amastendira, his eyes never left the bestial mech.

"It's a fairly well-made felinid mech, but its armor is too light. Target its lower limbs joints if you can!"

"Did you hear that?! Target its limb joints!"

For a moment, Ves expected the surviving exo-skeleton soldier to pop out and fire his heavy gun at the joints. It wouldn't work, as his heavy rifle still needed minutes to chew through the thin cover of armor around the joints.

Instead, something much more devastating fired from the side. A small volley of ballistic projectiles fired out. Some of them successfully hit the legs but only dented the armor. A second volley burst out, and this time the cat mech failed to safeguard its limbs. The mech suddenly collapsed after losing two of its limbs at once.

Subsequent volleys chewed apart the damaged mech to the point its mech pilot ejected away from the fallen mech.

A strange silence spread out as the Vandals regained their senses.

"We're alive?"

Ves turned to the side to see what had shot it apart. Who or what had rescued them at the last moment?

#### **Chapter 477 Commander Breskin**

A ballistic rifleman mech emerged from the side. Ves didn't recognize its exact model, but it proudly sported a coating of burgundy and black.

"Friendlies!" Someone cried in relief. "We're saved!"

Lieutenant Burke quickly ordered them to regroup and line up. They wanted to meet the Vandal mechs with a semblance of honor.

They all complied. Those who fled sheepishly returned while those who dropped their weapons quietly picked them up. Everyone pretty much selectively forgot their disgraceful actions a moment ago. They lined up in rows as several mechs emerged from a narrow side street.

The squad of mechs that emerged turned out to have been detached from the main ground force. The Flagrant Vandals had managed to send some elements in their direction, just in time to bail them out.

Ves looked at Lieutenant Burke, who appeared to be communicating with the commanding officer of the squad through a private channel. Hopefully they would bring them away from this place and take them back to their ships where they would immediately depart for orbit.

Sadly, the Vandals had other ideas in mind. Once the lieutenant finished her talk, she turned to the motley group of survivors.

"We are not going back just yet. Command wants us to head to a nearby stronghold of the Detemen League and assist them in combing the city for Lord Javier's trace."

None of them seemed happy with the decision, but they had no choice but to follow orders. As much as they wanted to get away from this planet, as long as Lord Javier was at large, they still hadn't completed their main objective for this daring assault.

Some time later, Ves ended up in a small armored transport as it made its way towards the rebel position. A pair of mechs escorted their transport, so none of them worried about getting shot. This allowed the exhausted Vandals to let down their guard and rest.

"Close thing, huh? I truly thought I would enter oblivion at that moment." A warrant officer spoke. "This is why I hate being bound by land. I can't wait to get back in space."

Ves turned to the seat to his left and looked at the man who spoke. "Are you a spacer?"

"Aye. I had a nice time aboard the Rising Apple. I started off at life support before moving on to cargo handling. That lasted long enough before they busted me with skimming off the luxury foodstuffs meant for officers." The warrant officer chuckled.

"What happened to you after that?" Ves asked.

"They put me in charge of organic recycling! Basically, I became the ship's plumber! It was the worst job of my life! In a way, I'm glad the missiles hit the Rising Apple, because at least I'm out of my job now!"

Ves couldn't help but laugh along with the ship-based Vandal. "I see. So how is surface life treating you?"

"Ugh, don't get me started with the air. The temperature fluctuates like a drunken weasel and the pollutants floating around makes me want to wear a filtration mask. I don't understand how you landbound people deal with an environment that flips whenever it wants."

"Well, you can say the same about me. I don't understand how you spaceborn folk stay sane by spending countless years in fragile boxes in space. So many things can go wrong, and the more you travel through space, the more something bad will eventually strike your ship."

The warrant officer shrugged. "That's the beauty of it. Ships are artificial creations. We built them from our own efforts and understand exactly how they work. As long as you treat them right, they'll never go wrong on you."

"That sounds the same as how mech pilots regard their mechs." Ves nodded. He found it intriguing to hear such a sentiment from a spacborn. Perhaps that was how they stayed sane in space.

The armored transport slowed down and shifted onto solid ground.

"Looks like we've reached our destination!"

Once the hatch opened up, the bedraggled Vandals emerged in an underground compound of sorts. The cavernous hall looked as if something crudely dug into the soil and reinforced the walls in a hurry. Mechs, vehicles, supplies and weapons all mixed in the same space as the rebels hadn't bothered to dig any other chambers in this hidden hole.

"Follow me." Burke said as she took charge again. Apparently, she received some instructions beforehand. "Make sure to keep your weapons stowed. The rebels are on our side, but don't forget that they are Vesians at heart. They don't look kindly to Brighters."

That quickly became evident as they moved through makeshift corridors. Piles of crates stacked up on either side of them as they squeezed through narrow openings one by one. The level of disorganization in this underground hall really irked Ves. The LMC would never stack up their goods in such a haphazard fashion.

After a few minutes of navigating the chaotic area, they reached some sort data center with many rows of terminals available for use. Several members of the Detemen League sat in front of the terminals, working on something with serious expressions.

A man in rebel uniform greeted Lieutenant Burke. "You must be the shipwrecked! Welcome to one of our cells. It's not pretty here, but it's safe."

"I appreciate your help. We could truly use a break, but I understand you have something in store for us."

The rebel leader nodded. "Our hunt for Lord Javier is closing in on his position. We've ruled out the vicinity of his palace as his most probably hiding

spot. Our most up-to-date guess of his current location places him a few districts away from where we found you."

"Lord Javier is close?" Burke frowned. "How come he's here? There is nothing of note in this part of Neron City."

"That's the beauty of it. We know most of his hiding spots, because some of my fellow rebels helped build the underground bunkers. As far as Lord Javier is concerned, there can never be too few bunkers. So the first thing we did when we launched this operation was to crack open those eggs."

Obviously, they didn't find the elusive noble.

"He could still be hiding somewhere downtown. It's too big for us to comb through." Burke said.

"We thought of that as well, and sent most of our assets there. We found nothing except some decoys and a lot of useless Eneqqin loyalists fighting for a lost cause and an unworthy leader."

"Then what has made you think that Lord Javier can be found all the way here?"

"We caught his butler." The rebel leader grinned. "He's not a disposable employee like the rest. The butler knows a lot about Lord Javier, but we immediately focused on getting the location of where he hid."

The subsequent interrogation led to the rebels diverting their attention to this specific area. It was well out of downtown and the palace, and was situated far away from the manufacturing district. It had nothing going for it except for a lot of boring offices interspersed with medium-sized apartment buildings.

By all accounts, this area was one of the most boring parts of Neron City.

"From what we got out of the butler, Lord Javier is enamoured by the idea of hiding here, because he thinks he's outsmarting us by hiding in such an unremarkable location."

The argument sounded very compelling. From everything Ves knew about Lord Javier, he agreed that someone like him would think that way.

"What are our duties?"

"There are a number of tasks that need to be done if we want to comb through the neighboring streets. It needs to be done fast and it also needs to be thorough. We've got men out on the streets and the assistance of your unit's mechs, but that's hardly enough to sweep the entire area. That's where you come in. I'll explain each of the tasks."

The rebel outlined a number of areas where they could assist their efforts. One of them entailed supervising and performing maintenance on their vehicles. Another task involved sitting behind a terminal while sorting through any suspicious footage they pulled from the sensor bugs they released on the streets.

Nothing had to do with mechs. The Detemen League didn't work with mechs at all, so Ves found it to be a shame that he wouldn't be able to tinker with mechs.

After listing out the options, the rebel clapped his hands. "We can only sustain our search for nine more hours. Beyond that, we need to pack up our assets and make it out of the city before Vesian reinforcements catches up on our tail.

Nine hours?! That was a lot faster than Ves had thought. Everyone else looked at each other with a puzzled expression. Nobody believed that Lord Javier could be found within such a short timespan. The spoiled brat had done a good job staying out of reach.

"If our guess is correct and Lord Javier is hiding somewhere close, then you shouldn't worry about the nine-hour time limit. As long as you work diligently, we'll be ruling out more and more areas where he could be hiding until we finally stumble upon his location!"

Everyone quickly split up according to their expertise. Some expressed interest in performing maintenance on their vehicles, while others wanted nothing more than to sit back behind a terminal and do something that resembled their own duties aboard their former ships.

As for Ves, the rebels singled him out for some reason. "You must be Mr. Larkinson."

"I am. And you are..?" Ves asked a hard-eyed rebel woman that slinked from a narrow corridor.

"You can call me Addy. Come with me."

Addy led him through a number of other narrow corridors until they reached some stairs. Ves climbed up on it until they stepped foot on a ramp that looked down on the chaos of the underground hall.

Ves took in the sights as he kept pace with Addy. Though on ground level the interior looked chaotic, up here he thought he spotted a couple of methods to the madness. Perhaps the rebels hadn't stacked their goods without any thought. The layout looked a lot more profound than he expected.

That didn't matter much, though, because the open space above easily allowed a flying soldier to take in all the sights.

After climbing up another flight of stairs, they reached a enclosed room which Addy needed time to unlock. Once the armored hatch opened up, Ves and Addy entered into some kind of conference room.

"Take a seat, Mr. Larkinson."

An old man sat at the head of the table. Though they shared no resemblance, Ves thought the man radiated the same vibes as his formidable grandfather.

"May I know who you are and why I am here?" Ves asked. Apprehension grew at him when he was taken far away from the rest. What did the rebels want from a mech designer like him?

"I am Commander Breskin. I am in charge of this cell."

Breskin must be a big shot of the Detemen League, then. Ves sat up a little straighter in his chair. "I am honored."

"Now, please hold your patience, because the reason for your presence here requires some explanation. I can tell you now, though, is that your assistance may lead us straight to Lord Javier."

Ves became stunned at the bold declaration. The best and brightest of the Detemen League and the Flagrant Vandals had tried for days to track down that elusive fox. To hear from the commander that Ves of all people could deliver a breakthrough in the search sounded preposterous.

In truth, he wanted to ask if they needed to be looked at in their heads.

"I'm a mech designer. I make a living by working with mechs. I don't search for fugitives." He spoke simply, as if he tried to explain why things fell down to the ground to a little child.

The commander nodded his head over and over and over again. "That's exactly what we need!"

"Commander, he's confused." Addy sighed, and turned to Ves. "To be more exact, we are not expecting you to track down Lord Javier. Instead, we want you to track down his personalized mech."

## Chapter 478 Lord Javier

Ves experienced too many crises since the Flagrant Vandals arrived in the Detemen System.

Taking part in a monumental operation, escaping from a disintegrating ship and dropping onto Detemen IV with nothing but a crash pad wracked his nerves.

Roaming the streets of Neron City by himself, threatening a pathetic Novice Mech Designer to use his equipment, getting picked up by Captain Orfan only to flee again under Lieutenant Burke really set him off.

What was he doing here?

He wanted nothing more than to go back to orbit, but the Vandals and the rebels had other ideas in store. Ves looked at Commander Breskin with a weary gaze. Even though his body could keep him awake for days at a time, his mental exhaustion almost pushed him to the breaking point.

He needed time to think and decompress. He needed to reflect on his mistakes and figure out a better approach to problems.

Yet the rebel commander stayed firm. "Nine hours. No more. We have until then to track down our elusive goal."

His words made it clear that he brooked no compromise on this matter. Breskin didn't even stick around. After exchanging some words with Addy, he left the conference room, leaving Ves alone with the young rebel woman.

"This sounds crazy." Ves wearily said as clapped his hand on his beaten combat armor. The fall dented it really badly, causing him to feel a bit uncomfortable as the plates pressed into him. "How am I supposed to pinpoint the location of a single mech out of potentially thousands in the city? I'm not a bloodhound, for heaven's sake!"

Addy retrieved a data pad from her rebel uniform jacket and pressed it onto the table before sliding it up to Ves. "Please read the brief before concluding it can't be done."

Ves picked up the pad and turned it on. He read the brief inside and started to become engrossed.

"What?"

House Eneqqin was a very significant force in the Imodris Duchy. It enjoyed a storied history as well, and the House encompassed many branch families. Lord Javier may be the only son of Count Loqer, who was the head of the House, but in the background countless nephews schemed against him. Once Loqer died or retired, it wasn't a given that Javier would come into power.

"Count Loqer is an exceptional noble within the court of the Duchess of Imodris, and has even served as her chief of staff for one time." Addy explained. "He has single-handedly elevated House Eneqqin to its current heights. Many argue that he might be the most powerful count in the Duchy at this time."

"How come his son is such a craven bastard?"

Addy sighed and bent her head. "I don't know. The high nobility is not something commoners like us can understand. For some reason, Count Loqer doesn't have any natural offspring besides Lord Javier, and he dotes upon his only child to an excessive degree."

"Is the count infertile? Even if that's so, there are many ways to get another heir."

"You obviously don't understand Vesian succession laws." She said with a rueful smile. "Think about it. If a noble resorts to cloning or other artificial means of generating offspring, what stops their rivals from doing the same? An old trick is to steal a DNA sample from someone, splice an offspring and

secretly raise the child to be loyal to your cause. When the time was right, the secret offspring would contend with the legitimate heirs to inherit the title of their parents."

That did make some sense. These days, many people didn't bother with pregnancy and bringing a child to term inside the belly of a mother. As long as someone paid a sufficient amount of money, they could effortlessly offload the gestation and birthing process to an artificial womb.

Though many humans took this technology for granted, many others feared the use of artificial wombs would harm their children. The topic was very divisive, but it had nothing to do with Ves so he never looked into it until now.

"Even if Count Loqer is... less than fertile, how come he hasn't fixed that yet?"

"The matter isn't so simple." Addy said while shaking her head. "There are ways to remedy his infertility, but they are all rather extreme to the point where they run up to the limits of the succession laws. Will a child birthed from the 'new' him still be his own child, or someone else's?"

All of this started to make his head spin so Ves just accepted the argument and moved on. "Alright, let's say that Lord Javier won't be getting little brothers and sisters anytime soon. What does that have to do with tracking down his mech?"

"Well, as I said earlier, Count Loqer spoils his son rotten. Javier can pretty much do what he wants. No matter how much of a mess he makes, his father will always come and wipe his butt. However, there is one area in Javier's upbringing where the count is extremely strict in. Can you make a guess?"

Ves only needed a second to come up with an answer. "His mech pilot training. Every noble in the Vesia Kingdom is either a mech pilot or a descendant of a mech pilot who performed meritorious services. Strength is

power in this state, and there's nothing worse than an heir that doesn't know how to pilot mechs."

"Exactly! You can say what you will about Lord Javier, but he is a fairly impressive mech pilot, if only because of his strict tutoring and exacting physical training regime. We believe the pressure he's enduring from his constant training has led to much of the excesses that he has become known. It's his way of venting his frustration."

To Count Loqer and Lord Javier, acting like a complete bastard to their own people was worth it if the heir continued to make a lot of progress in his training.

The people of Detemen IV saw it very differently, however. With the rising amount of abuses and the deteriorating economy, Lord has long taken the place of the planet's bogeyman. No one wanted to live under a frivolous tyrant.

"What's the worst things he has done?"

His question caused Addy to grow grim. "We don't know. He hides as much of his activities as he can. One of the worst cases that we know of is that he once detained every woman from Neron City's corps de ballet. Our city's ballet dancers are our pride and joy, and are famed throughout the Imodris Duchy for their sublime performance arts. After Lord Javier got his hands on them, they were never seen again."

Ves didn't need to hear more. Just this story alone was enough to understand Lord Javier's complete lack of regard for the territory and people he ruled over. If he ever inherited the title of Count from his father, he would ruin a lot more planets than Detemen IV.

"Okay, so Lord Javier is a depraved sack of dung. That's great to hear, but what about his mech? What does he pilot?"

"Count Loqer commissioned a Senior Mech Designer by the name of Constantine Reeve. Have you ever heard of this designer?"

"I'm not familiar with Vesian mech designers. Their mech market is fairly isolated from ours. We don't sell our mechs to them, and they don't sell their mechs to us. Only a couple of traders try to bypass the trading restrictions by taking an indirect trading route, but by and large it doesn't pay off."

"Well Constantine Reeve is a big name in the Vesia Kingdom. He's known for his excellent rifleman mechs and swordsman mechs, but he also designs personalised mechs for nobles who can pay for his services. For Lord Javier, Reeve has designed a fantastic hero mech for the brat."

This caused ves to rub his eyes. "Say again? Did you just mention a hero mech?"

"I did not misspeak. Lord Javier's main combat mech is a hero mech. It's his most cherished acquisition and there is never a day where he isn't practicing with it. The intelligence we gathered on the mech is on the data pad as well."

Ves browsed to the relevant documents while he thought about the fact that Lord Javier piloted one of the most controversial mech types in the industry.

The so-called hero mech was nothing but a fancy marketing term of a specific type of humanoid mech. They almost always came in a medium weight class, and wielded two main weapons instead of one. One arm always wielded a light rifle while the other arm held a one-handed melee weapon such as a sword or an axe.

The idea behind the hero mech was to provide talented mech pilots who were skilled in both melee combat and ranged combat with the means to do both at the same time.

Before the emergence of hero mechs, some other hybrid mechs had been developed to employ both a ranged weapon and a melee weapon, but only

one at a time. While the concept sounded simple to a layman, only a mech designer knew how difficult it was to insure a strong performance with both modes of combat.

The hero mech was supposed to reduce that complexity by devoting one arm to melee combat and the other arm for ranged combat. This inherently introduced an imbalance in the mech, but through several means mech designers were able to compensate for this. What resulted was a silly looking mech that formed the favorite of many action dramas throughout the galaxy.

"Okay, tell me this. Did Lord Javier choose to pilot a hero mech because it looks cool, or because he's good at it?"

"With someone like him, it's both." Addy answered. "He started off without any training, but under the guidance of his instructors, he has become very deadly with his Loquacious Raphael."

"What a mouthful of a name. Did he try to tribute his father when he named his mech?"

Addy shrugged. "The Raphael is a very fearsome mech nonetheless. Any work of Constantine Reeve is a masterpiece, and that goes double for his custom mechs."

Hero mechs were notoriously hard to pilot. Duel wielding was already an issue, but wielding a full-sized rifle and melee weapon at the same time put a lot of mental strain on any mech pilot. Ves had to readjust his judgement of Lord Javier.

If he managed to master the Loquacious Raphael, then it would be a given for him to inherit the title of count from his father despite his many faults. Nobody wanted to mess with a mech pilot who could fight one against ten in the right circumstances.

One of the many reasons why hero mechs starred so often in action dramas was because they became known as mechs that could win against overwhelming odds. In practice, most mech pilots weren't good enough to exhibit the potential of their hero mechs, but Lord Javier might be the real deal here if Ves put stock in the intelligence reports compiled by the rebels.

As Ves read more and more about the Loquacious Raphael, he understood why the rebels believed he could track down this mech.

Journeyman and Senior Mech Designers employed many advanced techniques in their designs that lower-ranked designers couldn't hope to emulate. The effect was similar but different from resonance in that it didn't take an expert pilot to draw out the potential of a resonating material.

The former was called fake resonance, while the latter referred to true resonance.

True or fake, both types of resonances generated a lot of energy. A mech that resonated radiated special signals depending on the strength of the resonance.

For example, Ves once witnessed Venerable Drake in his Fire Worm striker mech charging up a laser rifle or his flamethrowers with resonance. Such a huge buildup of energy could easily be detected from hundreds of thousands of kilometers away.

That was a case of true resonance at its apex. The story would be very different in this case.

"It can't be done." Ves concluded. "Fake resonance is a hundred times harder to detect than true resonance. Besides, is Lord Javier stupid enough to pilot his Loquacious Raphael in the first place?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised, Mr. Larkinson."

## Chapter 479 Hero Mechs

Some time later, Ves sat behind a terminal in the data center. More than two-dozen other rebels or Vandals performed their own tasks behind their own terminals in the partially enclosed space.

The hunt for Lord Javier continued. The rebels needed everyone they could spare to follow up on suspicious footage and anomalous signals. They had accumulated a vast amount of observation data, but possessed too few means to process them all in a timely fashion.

Thus, the need for Lieutenant Burke and some of her more computer-adept Vandals to check through mounds of data, just to obtain a tiny clue about the noble's whereabouts.

The manhunt for Lord Javier certainly took a toll on everyone. Forget about the Flagrant Vandals, the Detemen League which staked their all in taking down the man was nowhere close to pinning his location.

Addy explained the dire necessity of capturing Lord Javier to Ves at the end of the briefing. "Our rebellion is fighting against the Vesian way of governance. Many fellow rebel groups based throughout the Kingdom is paying attention to what is happening here. We've loudly proclaimed that we intend to take Lord Javier down. To that end, we've taken advantage of a so-called pirate attack and we are even working in concert with Brighters such as you. After so many sacrifices, failure will finish the Detemen League."

In other words, the Detemen League wanted to redeem the deaths and chaos that ensued in these chaotic days by taking down their most hated tyrant. As long as Lord Javier died in their hands, the public would willingly if grudgingly accept the enormous damage done to their planet.

Of course, Ves did not quite think that such a trade was worthwhile. Having roamed the streets of Neron City in person, the devastation was much more extensive and ruinous than the rebels initially thought.

Still, no matter how much the citizens suffered, the Detemen League were already riding the back of a tiger. They couldn't get off at this point without being savaged.

"This entire operation is stupid. Too much hinges on hope and desperation."

What irked Ves the most was that the Flagrant Vandals made overly rosy projections. Every single step of the plan was met with delays or setbacks. The original timetable for this operation no longer applied, and Ves got the feeling that most of the Vandals did whatever they thought was best right now.

Ves truly wanted to applaud Lord Javier for being such a decisive coward. Loathsome he may be, merely by going into hiding, he ruined most of the plans by the rebels and the Vandals. As long as Lord Javier remained out of reach, he would be able to destroy the foundations of both the Detemen League and the Flagrant Vandals.

Compared to letting half his planet burn, the little bastard probably thought the price would be worth the suffering.

Who was Ves kidding. Only the citizens suffered while Lord Javier leaned back and drank champagne or something.

"He needs to be taken down a notch."

What Lord Javier did in his own territory didn't matter too much to Ves. He sympathised with the righteousness of the rebel cause, but as a Brighter he preferred it if the Kingdom was plunged into turmoil. Perhaps if every Vesian planet rioted, then the Mech Legion wouldn't be pounding so aggressively on the Bright Republic's gates.

"Well, let's get back to my job. How will I be able to find the Loquacious Raphael?"

The rebels gathered a decent amount of surface intelligence on the Raphael. While they hadn't been able to get their hands on the juiciest files such as its design schematics or its spec sheet, they did get their hands on Constantine Reeve's maintenance instructions.

A highly advanced mech was a lot harder to maintain than a run-of-the-mill mech. Replacement parts consisted of difficult to work with alloys and needed to be reproduced to an exact degree in order to repair an advanced mech.

From the maintenance instructions that Reeve provided to Lord Javier, only the lesser components of the Raphael should be reproduced at home. For the more sophisticated components such as the power reactor and engine, Lord Javier had to request a replacement from Reeve's mech company.

"That's a shame."

From what Ves determined from the intelligence on the Loquacious Raphael, much of its fake resonance revolved around its powerful energy reactor. Without any schematics, descriptions or images of the hero mech's reactor, Ves had nothing to base his starting point on. He needed to fill the gaps with his imagination in order to progress.

"Okay, since the energy reactor is a black box, what about its lesser components?"

Ves quickly turned his attention to the arms. The asymmetrical arms incorporated a lot of sophisticated systems depending on what weapons they wielded. However, their propensity for damage and manageable complexity led Mr. Reeve to delegate the maintenance and repair to House Eneqqin's mech technicians. The arms didn't need to be reproduced in the most advanced fabrication environment. Just a normal premium production line would do.

The arms played an important role for the Loquacious Raphael. The effects of the fake resonance needed to be channeled from the power reactor in the torso to the weapons held in the hands. This demanded special channels to be run through from the base of the arms to the tips of the fingers.

The only problem was that Ves didn't immediately spot these so-called channels. He looked at the maintenance schematics of the sword arm and rifle arm but couldn't spot any obvious section which served as resonance channels.

It was like staring at a bundle of identical ropes. How could he determine the one that behaved differently from the norm when he had never seen them in action?

"These files are woefully incomplete."

It quickly became clear to him that the rebels hadn't managed to snag the complete set of maintenance documents. They only nabbed the most relevant documents to maintain the Loquacious Raphael on a day-to-day basis. Ves didn't have access to the documents related to the more substantial repairs.

"Is it even possible for me to make any progress at this point?"

Ves hit a wall about two hours into his investigation. He chased after several leads, but every potential resonance channel turned out to serve a different purpose.

"How does Constantine Reeve manage to pull off such a ridiculous mech?"

A lot of mech designers looked at hero mechs with skepticism. Ves inherited this standpoint from his teachers who believed the best mechs consisted of specialised mechs. Any machine that tried to perform multiple roles at once inevitably needed to compromise on its design.

Having worked on hybrid knights such as the Caesar Augustus, Marc Antony and Hellcat designs, Ves knew that was true. A mech that tried to do two or three things at once would never be able to deliver the same amount of performance as a mech that only tried to utilize one weapon well.

Still, his hands-on experience also taught him not to discount the concept of hybrid mechs. The way the Flagrant Vandals used the Hellcats certainly opened his eyes to their potential value. The mech regiment hadn't picked the Hellcats as their prestige mechs for nothing.

"Hybrid mechs have a superhuman quality to them. Even if their performance is supposed to be mediocre on paper, with the right pilot they are able to pull off a lot more feats than if they only adhered to a single role."

It sounded like a paradox, but really wasn't. The key to appreciating hybrid knights lay in their ability to synergize with itself.

More weapons provided the mechs with more tools. They could tackle more problems on their own because they always had the right tool for the job. Even if the tools turned out to be a little shabby, that was better than having no tool at all.

The Vandals employed Hellcats as shock units, meant to overwhelm enemy formations through a short succession of highly kinetic attacks. From the missiles, to the nail drivers, to the charge and shield impact, every sequence involved putting the enemy at their back foot.

The strategy worked particularly well in space because mechs didn't have any footing in the first place. They relied on their flight systems to maintain their positions, and they could easily be overwhelmed if subjected to too much force.

In this way, the Vandals made brilliant use out of a mech that strangers would ordinarily dismiss as trash.

"Every mech possesses an underlying logic. The Loquacious Raphael shouldn't be any different."

In the absence of further data, Ves figured he needed to approach the problem from a different direction. He tried to put himself in Mr. Reeve's shoes and imagine the fighting style of the Raphael.

Hero mechs different exhibited many different variations. Some put the emphasis on sniping. They wielded a powerful semi-automatic ballistic rifle that fired powerful kinetic projectiles that took down their opponents from a long to medium range.

For battles up close, they tended to wield a spear or other long-handled weapon in order to fend off an approaching mech until the hero mech could point its powerful rifle at the offending mech.

Other hero mechs tried to be light on their feet and swift in their movements. They wielded short swords or knives in one hand that allowed them to be as deadly as skirmishers, but they wielded pistols or submachine guns in the other hand to pose a threat to aerial mechs and other distant threats.

The Loquacious Raphael happened to adopt one of the most standard hero mech loadouts, and the one most often featured in unrealistic action dramas. It wielded a rapid-fire ballistic rifle in one hand and a bog-standard sword in the other hand.

Every mech pilot trained with these two weapons from the start. It didn't take much of an adjustment for any mech pilot to get used to wielding both weapons at once.

The challenge lay in achieving enough synergies so that the mech pilot outperformed a rifleman mech or a swordsman mech by a wide enough margin.

Still, did hero mechs outperform standard mechs because they held more potential, or because mech pilots believed they would deliver a better performance with these machines?

"Are hero mechs only popular because they're piloted by the heroes in action dramas?"

It was an interesting question, but one which Ves would never be able to figure out on his own. The question had a chicken and egg type of quality to it. No matter the original merits of a hero mech, it was undeniable that their proliferation in the galactic media made them into mechs that were larger-than-life.

Perhaps that was what drew Lord Javier to a hero mech type in the first place. He wanted to become the hero of his own story, and distinguish himself from all the other mech pilots that settled for normal mechs.

Part of the reason why so few people piloted hero mechs was that it demanded at least thrice as much training as normal mechs.

Mech pilots needed to keep up their swordsmanship and marksmanship in equal measure. Then they needed to devote another round of training into mixing them together in a cohesive whole.

"It can't be done by an average mech pilots. Even my family never pays attention to it, and we're practically a military dynasty."

Only an extraordinary heir such as Lord Javier possessed the right conditions to make a hero mech work. If he possessed the resources, persistence and talent to not make a fool out of himself, then perhaps he was one of the few mech pilots who wouldn't be disgracing himself with a hero mech.

Ves looked back at the image of the Loquacious Raphael. Coated in House Eneqqin's astral blue and silver, the mech made for an extremely valiant sight.

However, as much as its rifle looked shiny and lethal, Ves faintly felt as if it emphasised its sword a little more.

"Perhaps herein lies the clue."

#### Chapter 480 Different Philosophy

"There's something strange about the Loquacious Raphael."

Ves looked past its ungainly name and its unusual loadout. Instead, he began to dip his perspective into Mr. Reeve's design philosophy.

He quickly found out that this was an exceedingly dangerous move. Higher-ranked mech designers constantly warned those who haven't formed their own design philosophies that they shouldn't take too much inspiration from the works of their betters.

The older generation trod their own path. Following in their footsteps risked turning younger mech designers into pale imitations of their teachers.

Though he started to speculate over incomplete data, what the Detemen League managed to gather so far painted a broad enough picture of the Raphael's intended use.

"Just like other hybrid mechs, the Raphael is built to impress."

While vanity definitely played a major role, the mech's entire design was suffused with the intention of making an impact on allies and enemies alike.

Basically, the Loquacious Raphael weaponized its showmanship. Every aspect of it was designed first and foremost to show off.

Practicality took something of a back seat in terms of priority, but that didn't mean that Mr. Reeve neglected it entirely. Instead, Mr. Reeve successfully exaggerated the appearance and abilities of his mech without detrimentally affecting his design too much. Ves felt as if his entire design philosophy seemed to build up to a perfect fusion of awe and efficiency.

Ves initially didn't know what to make of such a silly standpoint. Ordinary teaching in the field of mech design treated it as a solemn profession. Mechs should be devoid of flashy gizmo's and attention-grabbing cosmetics.

Yet did those classes truly represent the will of the people? His own products all incorporated a little showmanship themselves, what with the incorporation of the completely impractical but very cool Festive Cloud Generator in his design.

"Yeah. I'm guilty of this as well."

Mr. Reeve simply took this guilty pleasure as his core competency and developed it towards an extreme. Ves didn't even need to look at his design catalog to know that his mechs must be highly desired props in action dramas.

Still, while the Raphael looked good in a projection, it made an even better impression in the flesh. One of Reeve's tricks was to finetune the sounds his mechs released when they moved. Each motion carried its own sound, and each of those sounds had been selected for maximum psychological impact.

A person standing near or in the cockpit of a nearby mech would feel the threat of the Raphael in their bones.

Its ballistic rifle formed another point of showmanship. While its frame looked rather large and intimidating, it was fairly hollow underneath its surface. The rifle unleashed rapid-fire shells or projectiles that could overwhelm any mech in close to medium range due to their fairly huge caliber.

As anyone with a brain could imagine, this capability came at a cost. Intense recoil caused the rifle to swing wildly out of control, and the magazine would quickly run out of projectiles after a quick succession of shots. Still, as a tool for intimidation, the weapon worked splendidly in this capacity.

"The rifle is meant for intimidation. It's the sword that kills."

The Loquacious Raphael's sword took on a golden sheen. Its shape resembled the straight sword of a knight, which gave the weapon a heroic impression. Outside of that, the weapon looked fairly simple, but that did not take away from its deadliness. The excellent materials and incredible sharpness of the sword allowed it to puncture through heavy armor in the right circumstances.

In a way, Reeve compromised the least on the sword, giving the Raphael at least one reliable means of taking out its opponents.

That lack of compromise and emphasis on genuine performance reflected back in the sword arm. It incorporated a bit less frivolity compared to the arm meant to wield the rifle.

"Reeve still hasn't brought his design philosophy to the apex."

The time when Constantine Reeve successfully married showmanship with practicality whereby improving one would pull up the latter would be the moment when he advanced to the rank of Masters. Every Master became known of making the impossible into the possible.

From a professional standpoint as a mech designer, Ves certainly looked forward whether Reeve could succeed.

"Still, mech designer or not, I'm also a citizen of the Bright Republic. Since we're on opposite sides, don't blame me for taking apart your work."

Ves faced an important question at this point. Did Mr. Reeve employ the fake resonance to augment the Raphael's sword arm or rifle arm?

"It could be both, but I doubt it. Resonating two completely divergent effects is too much."

Even if Reeve made it his life mission to turn the impossible into reality, some goals were harder to obtain than others. Ves figured that the Senior Mech Designer chose to surrender on this matter.

That left Ves with a guess on which aspect of the mech the resonance was supposed to enhance.

From a practical perspective, strengthening the arm and sword allowed the Raphael to be a powerhouse up close. The mech already possessed plenty of intimidation factor in its rifle, but adding an extra kick to its sword attacks turned it into a fearsome killing machine in close quarters combat.

However, Ves also came up with an argument against augmenting the sword attacks. "The sword arm is already good enough. It doesn't need to be any stronger."

Channeling resonance in the ballistic rifle allowed the Raphael to shoot exotic projectiles that expressed itself in strange ways upon impact. The effects varied wildly depending on the exotics used in the formation of the projectiles.

Some burned hot on impact, while others froze the impact site. Some caused the projectiles weigh twice as heavy, others caused them to partially phase through any obstacle, thereby dealing significant internal damage.

The challenge facing Ves was that he didn't know how the Raphael expressed its fake resonance. It might not even be focused on an offensive form, though Ves figured that was unlikely.

A mech designed to show off wouldn't focus its resonance towards defense of auxiliary functions.

"Resonating the sword allows the Raphael to become even deadlier in battle, while resonating the rifle enables the mech makes it a lot more flashier."

When Ves framed the question in this way, the answer seemed obvious. Reeve always chose to take the flashier options. While he did not have any hard proof of his assertions, Ves strongly felt that his deduction agreed with the design philosophy he perceived from the Raphael.

Ves nuzzled his head with his palm as he finished this extensive train of thought. Diving into another mech designer's design philosophy was never easy, though his mind quickly recovered from the strain.

"Is my Spirituality helping me cope with the dangers of studying someone else's design philosophy?"

His highly developed mental and spiritual capabilities protected him from the dangers of diving too deep into matters that Apprentice Mech Designers shouldn't be dealing with in this stage of their careers. Ves had never thought too much about it, but perhaps this was an advantage that he largely overlooked until now.

Ideas formed into his mind, but he quickly pushed them away. "Now is not the time to exploit this possibility. I still have a job to do."

A lot of thoughts ran through his mind as he looked at the files on the Loquacious Raphael. He focused on the rifle arm in particular and studied each and every facet the rebels had gathered on the limb.

"There's no obvious resonance channel, so it must probably work through other components."

Plenty of reinforced channels and cables ran from the base of the arm to the tip. The power was necessary to fuel the functioning of the components embedded along the way as well as interface with the rifle via touch.

"There should be something there. These composites and alloys look suspicious."

Ves looked up the the materials on the galactic net and found out that all of them enabled low-level resonance transmissions. While they looked to be fairly weak, the arm in fact incorporated a lot of this kind of material.

Could the answer be there in plain sight?

"Practically the entire arm is a resonance channel!"

The use of so many different substances must have led to a lot of inefficiencies that weakened the final result. Nevertheless, Reeve sacrificed little to accomplish this brand of resonance, thereby avoiding making any further compromises that caused the mech's performance to deteriorate.

"So let me see. If so many different materials are resonating at the same time, there's bound to be a substantial amount of interference. Perhaps... this can be tracked!"

Every resonance-capable exotic released a different signal. Material scientists speculated that the waves released by resonating exotics was a form of inefficiency. If a resonating material channeled all of its energies into a targeted reaction, then the process shouldn't release any superfluous signals.

To Ves, the Raphael's rifle arm pretty much reached the height in complexity in terms of channeling resonance. With many components pulling double duty, all of them evoked different frequencies of waves that meshed together like different music instruments in a song.

"Even if I know what instruments are used, the songs that they are able to play are practically endless."

Different forms of resonance affected exotics in different ways. Still, it was not as if the materials that Reeve incorporated in the arm possessed an unlimited amount of variation. The amount of 'songs' it could play was ultimately limited.

Ves finally knew what to do now in order to track the Raphael. He turned to his terminal and opened up a simulation program. He found a standard mathematical model that tested the resonance signals of many different kinds of materials.

Once Ves set the parameters to his liking, he initiated the simulation process and let it go to work. Ves looked at the progress bar of the simulation and knew that it would take a while for the processors to churn out the results.

He leaned back in his chair and looked around. Rows and rows of other people occupied the terminals in this section of the rebel base. Everyone worked diligently in order to track down Lord Javier with their own methods.

Would his investigation bear fruit or lead to nothing? It would be unimaginably frustrating for him to start from scratch if his theory turned out to be wrong.

After half an hour, the simulations finished. "Huh. That was fast. The rebels must have access to a lot of processing power."

In any case, the output came in the form of over twenty different resonance profiles. Using the previous analogy, the resonance profiles represented different songs.

Ves frowned a bit when he saw how weak and muddy these resonance profiles looked like. It wasn't easy trying to pick up these profiles from the mass of noise that suffused a major city every day.

After double-checking his process and results, Ves felt that he had done the best he could and wouldn't be able to deliver a stronger result. Therefore, he raised his hand and called over Addy.

"Mr. Larkinson, there is only about six hours left for us to apprehend Lord Javier. Have you made any headway into tracking down his mech?"

"I accomplished quite a lot. I may even have the means to pin down his mech's location as long as it's been activated recently."

Ves briefly explained the resonance profiles he came up with. As a layperson, Addy didn't know half the stuff that Ves referred to, and he already dumbed down his explanation by quite a bit.

Fortunately, due to the proliferation of action dramas, the concept of resonance wasn't completely unfamiliar to the public. They just possessed exaggerated misconceptions about their effects.

Addy's eyes glowed as soon as she got it. "This is brilliant! From what we know of Lord Javier, he will definitely choose to seek refuge in his mech for safety. If Javier has activated his mech, we can track down its movements and location as long as we try to find out if any of these profiles are picked up by the sensors we've scattered around the city."

This would be like seeking a musician from the sounds he produced as he moved around.

The only complication here was that the Raphael wouldn't be engaging its resonance while on the move. The actual signals would be extremely hard to detect if the Raphael kept its resonance at a dormant state.

"So I wouldn't get my hopes up, Addy." Ves finished explaining.

The woman practically ignored his caveat. All she could see was the silver bullet presented by him to her lap. "Don't worry Ves, this will definitely work, I can feel it!"

Since their time came closer and closer to running out, Addy didn't waste any time in bringing the potential solution to Commander Breskin.