

Chapter 501 Aged

The space burial served as a pivotal event which affected every Vandal among the Verle Task Force. Like a seed buried amidst the fertilizers of the fallen, a new life sprung into being.

"A new beginning."

Those words echoed throughout everyone's minds. Ves never imagined that Major Verle could be so eloquent. A speechwriter among his staff must have composed those uplifting and inspiring words.

After Ves took a mental step back, he realized the eulogy aimed to invigorate the Vandals. The last thing they needed was people getting hung up about the losses they sustained.

As a soldier of the Republic, they weren't soft-hearted to the extent that the death of a comrade plunged them into despair.

Yet human emotion was a complex beast, and all manner of negative thoughts might bloom in the darkness.

Verle's speech served as a light that banished that darkness and guided the thoughts of his subordinates to a more beneficial direction. The underlying message instructed them to cast away the shackles of the past and look towards a new beginning,

The act of plunging the caskets into space during the space burial could therefore be seen as a dividing line between the past and the present.

Right now, it was more important for the Verle Task Force to shake off Vesian pursuit and escape the Kingdom's borders. The Vesians must be incredibly furious at the daring act of striking at the heart of their territory. Only by butchering the guilty party would they be able to cleanse their shame!

This hounding threat provided the motivation while the space burial gave the Vandals the impetus to pick up their work. Their productivity soared as they pushed all thoughts of mourning the dead aside in order to deal with the present crisis.

Ves arrived at his furnished office the next day. The cabin received a clean but luxurious makeover that wouldn't look out of place from a cruise ship. Stylish metal furniture marked with green and brass motifs gave the entire cabin a sense that only the most distinguished gentlemen worked in this office.

"This is a bit too much." He spoke after he took in the sight.

"You're the boss now. You have to show that off. A barebones office won't do." Iris spoke from the side.

The cabin was kind of cramped, as was typical to ships where space came at a premium. Despite that limitation, Iris somehow managed to divide the interior in a way that squeezed in a desk and terminal for her as well.

Evidently, she wanted to work in the same room as Ves.

"I'll go fabricate some terminals." He said. "For now, please make contact with the staff aboard the Shield of Hispania. I can probably pull up some official reports from the terminal once its up, but it helps if you can tell me their impressions and overall opinions."

"I can do that, but be aware that I'm a guest aboard this ship. They won't tell me anything critical."

"That's okay. If I need to know about something, they'll pay me a visit or send me some classified documents on their own initiative."

After packing Iris off, Ves went down to the nearest workshop to fabricate some terminals and other high-tech gadgets to make his office complete. This

was something he needed to do by himself in order to insure that nobody tampered with his equipment. It was a lot harder to detect irregularities if someone tampered with it during the fabrication process.

Ves didn't go for anything fancy when he arrived at a 3D printer. He selected the most reliable and impenetrable models available in its database and made some minor tweaks before letting the device do all the work. He didn't even need to intervene in the production process due to the limited amount of variables at play.

Once the 3D printer spat out all of the gear he needed, he ordered a bot to bring them to his office. Ves accompanied the bot as they climbed the deck and supervised the installation process to insure nothing fudged the equipment.

After realizing that he'd been way too sloppy with regards to information security back at Detemen IV, Ves became way more paranoid about this matter. While he couldn't match Alloc's prowess in this area, his rapid study session back then boosted his Computer Science Skill to a respectable level, so he wasn't as clueless as before.

Once the bots left the office, Ves withdrew a multiscanner attached to his toolbelt and carefully scanned every nook and cranny of his office. He paid special attention to the furniture, but the device detected no anomalies.

Though the cabin did include some very covert monitoring devices, Ves quickly figured out that they were connected to the core systems of the Hispania. In other words, they formed part of the combat carrier's integrated security systems.

To be certain, Ves sent a quick message to the security department of the ship. They immediately confirmed guess, so Ves had to leave the bugs alone.

Obviously, no part of the ships escaped monitoring. Everyone was subjected to observation, but just because they came under scrutiny, didn't mean that someone would act on what the bugs recorded.

Ves keenly remembered treasonous talk among the spacers of the Wolf Mother. That they could get away with that talk meant that the Vandals didn't care too much about small offenses. Even talk of gambling, drinking and fraternization was met with silence.

This absence of action obviously meant that the Vandals couldn't be bothered with trivialities. As long as the spacers did their job, who cared if they broke over a dozen regulations of the Mech Corps.

"I could probably get away with many things." He figured.

That didn't mean it was wise to test the boundaries of what was possible. When you walked close to the river, your shoes would eventually get wet.

Still, Ves hadn't even formally started his job, but his mind already swirled with temptation. The job of head designer sounded very impressive, and Ves guessed he could turn a lot of things to his advantage if he wished.

"That's probably a bad idea right now."

His goal for the time being was fairly simple right now. He merely wanted to survive the current peril and make it through the war alive. Any benefits beyond this came as an extra.

Thus, after settling his momentary greed, he calmed down and became sober. Even the enviable amount of power that came with the position of head designer didn't excite him anymore. To him, the job was just another burden.

A few minutes later, Ves locked down the office and contacted Professor Velten. Unlike Ves and Iris, most of the other high-ranking mech designers

stayed with Colonel Lowenfield's fleet. The distance separating Lowenfield's fleet and Major Verle's task force ranged at least a dozen light-years.

To put that into perspective, it took at least twelve years for a conventional signal sent from one end to the other end.

Nonetheless, communicating with the other fleet happened instantly and seamlessly as long as both sides had access to quantum entanglement nodes.

One of the most basic privileges of a head designer was that they enjoyed expanded privileges when it came to accessing the galactic net and contacting others among the Vandals.

His terminal lit up as a projection of Professor Velten's face came into being. Though she looked dour most of the time, Ves immediately spotted something different.

The Professor's eyes were red, and her skin gained a lot of extra wrinkles. Already senile, the Senior Mech Designer had obviously aged substantially in a matter of weeks!

"Ah, professor, I, uh, am I calling at a bad time?"

"No." She replied hoarsely but with inner strength. Despite her outward appearance, she sounded as firm as a rock. "Our duties must go on. We cannot afford to rest while thousands are depending on us."

The professor obviously mourned for Alloc. Ves learned from his that he was actually the professor's legacy disciple. Alloc was her final protégé, and one who would inherit most of her knowledge and possessions after she passed away.

In the mech industry, the bond between a mentor and a mentee came in many forms. Most of the times, the relationship was shallow and transactional. The

mentor taught their student some of their knowledge, while the student toiled for the mentor or paid them something of value.

Naturally, more intimate relationships existed as well. To someone like Velten who benefited from a round of life-prolonging treatment, familial bonds often faded away. Mechs became her family, and the mech designers she nurtured substituted for her own offspring.

Like any parent, a mentor with a deep affection for their student never wished for them to perish before their time was up. The pain that came with this loss was heart-wrenching torture.

Ves suspected that if Velten's lifespan had just been cut in half at the very least. She wasn't very long for this universe. Once she died, the Flagrant Vandals lost their last remaining Senior Mech Designer. The consequences would certainly be very dire if the Vandals failed to get a replacement.

He minutely shook his head. That was for Colonel Lowenfield to worry about. Ves needed to focus on the problems that fell within his scope as a head designer of the task force.

Ves patiently waited for Velten to get a grip on her emotions. After she regained some clarity in her mind, she turned her attention to him. "Mr. Larkinson, why are you calling me? You don't possess the privilege to make an intersystem call!"

"Ah, don't you remember? With Alloc's absence, I've become the temporary head designer of Major Verle's task force."

He waited for several seconds as the professor's foggy mind processed his words. Frankly, that she forgot about his field promotion was inexcusable. Ves tactfully refrained from recommending that Velten should visit the infirmary and get her head checked.

A light finally switched on in her head. "Ah! I recall now. This is a highly irregular course of action, but the position of head designer cannot remain empty. Even if you lack the qualifications and experience to take up this position, I trust you will not be too inept at your new job."

"I'm still uncertain what my temporary job entails, ma'am. I've only heard vague descriptions so far and nobody sent me any instructions."

"Oh, I forgot to send you the relevant documents. Let me transfer them to you now. I highly recommend you peruse them all, but make sure you do not leak out the contents of the classified documents. I don't have to tell you what the consequences are if you are caught with spilling sensitive information."

His terminal beeped upon receipt of a whole pile of virtual documents. Ves skimmed over the files and saw that it included a large assortment of lists, budgets, manuals and schedules. This probably served as his foundation for his new job.

"Let me explain the role of head designer to you in the simplest terms." She began. "A head designer is a mech designer that is the foremost expert among the fleet or task force. This is the most essential criteria, and for this job to land on an Apprentice Mech Designer is highly unusual. In fact, it is unprecedented in the Mech Corps."

In other words, Ves needed to fill some very big shoes.

"I have one question, ma'am. Why not let one of your Journeymen act as your head designer in remote? Even if they aren't physically present in the task force, they can still perform just as well."

The professor shook her head. "This has been done many times, to mixed success. We do not have the right policies and training in place to accomplish such a thing. Physical presence is important. This is why the galaxy hasn't turned into a giant virtual playground where every human is immersed in a

permanent tank and interacts with the outside universe through a robot avatar. Humans are very social creatures. A close presence is essential in controlling an expansive organization."

Ves wouldn't be able to fob off the job to someone else, then. The professor was right that Ves probably held the most qualifications to wear this hat, even if it was too big to fit snugly on his head right now.

Chapter 502 Balancing Ac

"The buck stops with you." Professor Velten stated to Ves over the channel.

"Don't let anyone else dictate the mech composition of the task force. Every single mech company must match the specifications set by you. In fact, if you strongly believe you are right, you may even disregard my instructions!"

Ves almost became floored after she said that. Though he knew that the professor was fallible, he still couldn't fathom why he should reject her instructions. Her wisdom as a Senior far outclassed his limited perspective as an Apprentice.

"Why should I trust my own judgement over yours?"

"You're the man on the ground, as it were. I am far away from the task force, and the distance will only widen with time. Even if I can gather all manner of information through the quantum entanglement node, it is dangerous to transmit so much sensitive data over a distance. As the mech designer who is closer to the action, the information and impressions at your disposal exceeds my own."

"How far can I go with this, professor?"

"As far as you want to. You're the head designer, remember?" She sent a brief smile to him. "I am not in the habit of micromanaging my subordinates. Though I am not as familiar with you as Alloc, your record and the capabilities that you have shown has given me enough confidence that you can fulfill your

duties to the minimum extent. As long as the mechs of the task force aren't falling apart, you will have the leeway to structure their mech composition as much as you like."

"That's... a lot more extensive than I thought. Isn't it dangerous to put so much decision-making power at my disposal, ma'am?"

She shook her head. "You are but one cog in a great machine. A head designer never works in isolation. If the mech designers under your command think you are making a drastic mistake, they'll work to obstruct you in many ways. While you can arrest them and throw them into the brig if they become a thorn at your side, you'll lose a valuable resource that way. You can't possibly arrest every mech designer."

Less than ten high-ranking mech designers accompanied the task force. All of them including Ves, Iris and Pierce participated in the development of the core designs of the Flagrant Vandals. Their mastery and depth of knowledge was crucial in solving complicated problems.

Ves couldn't afford to fall out with his former peers.

"There are also the main institutions of the Flagrant Vandals. You have the line officers which mostly encompass the mech officers such as Major Verle and the various mech captains that lead their companies into battle. As the people closest to the action, they are burdened with the responsibility of shepherding their mech pilots through thick and thin. Their approval is essential for any plans you might have in store."

That made sense. If Ves turned crazy one day and insisted every mech in the task force replace their armor with pig iron, then he would instantly be beset with mutiny among the mech pilots. Major Verle himself may even barge into his cabin at night and butcher him in his sleep!

Ves shivered a bit. "I understand, ma'am. I'll be sure to take their opinions into account."

"The line officers care most about the specs and the concrete fighting capabilities of their mechs. These are highly trained mech commanders who wants what is best for their men regardless of the cost. However, the Flagrant Vandals aren't in a position where we can disregard our budgetary concerns."

"Good mechs tend to be expensive."

"Exactly, Mr. Larkinson. Keep in mind our current circumstances. We are knee-deep behind enemy lines, with not a single safe harbor in sight. The nearest neutral star system is months away. Acquiring the right materials is a challenge under these conditions is a challenge in itself."

Ves knew that to maintain a thousand mechs required an ungodly amount of materials. Though the Vandals looted a lot of valuables from the Detemen System, they prioritized the most valuable materials instead of the most relevant materials to maintain the mechs they currently fielded.

It was like a hungry man robbing a luxury handcrafted bag store. The robber may have come into possession of valuable bags, but that wouldn't satisfy his hunger!

This pretty much described the current state of Major Verle's task force.

"This is a lot of work." Ves frowned. "There should be others who are responsible with procurement, right?"

"That is correct. The staff officers are responsible for logistics and more. Most relevant for you is that they keep track of what the task force currently lacks and draw up plans to replenish any shortages. They also maintain relations with the VRF. In your current condition, you should lean on them to initiate trades with the rebel group. Within enemy space, only they can quench the task force's thirst for essential resources."

Ves felt as if a boulder lifted off his shoulders. He would truly tear his hair out if he needed to be responsible for supplying resources as well.

"So I need to work together with logistics to supply the task force with the materials to repair and maintain their mechs, right?"

"That is correct. They favor their own priorities, of course. The planners in charge of resource management wish to expend as little money or resources as possible. Their desire for efficiency grossly outweighs any other concerns. In truth, if not for their tireless efforts in maximizing every possible means at our disposal, the Flagrant Vandals might have long gone insolvent."

Back when Ves worked at the Wolf Mother, Professor Velten assigned him to the planning department for some time. Back then, he thought that the professor merely wanted someone sensible to act as a liaison between the logistics officers and the mech technicians, but now he realized that the professor was a lot more farsighted than he thought.

Did she nurture him for this role beforehand? Even as a contingency, the professor could never imagine that he needed to take on the role of head designer so soon!

Still, reality never cooperated with anyone, and Ves got thrust into the job long before he was ready to take on this responsibility. The brief amount of time he spent in the core of the Wolf Mother exposed him to the perspective of the logistics officers whose job was to make sure that every ship and every mech received adequate supplies.

Whether the professor deliberately groomed him or not, that exposure filled up a critical hole in his experience, thereby rounding out vision so that he could encompass everyone's perspective!

Though this did not bolster his confidence too much, he at least felt some reassurance that he wasn't working alone on the problems plaguing the task force.

The professor pointed something out to him. "Major Verle will have a staff at his disposal that leads the various sections of his command. One of them is certainly responsible for logistics, so that is your first contact point if you need to acquire specific resources."

"Understood."

"As you can see, the role of the head designer doesn't necessarily entail any hands-on design work. Maybe you feel that a critical job can only be performed correctly by you, but I advise you not to intervene in person too often. Your time is better spent on the primary task of your position, which is to act as the coordinator that brings different parties together to insure that they have the appropriate mechs on hand for their next missions."

In truth, being a mech designer wasn't necessary to act as a coordinator. It only helped with making the right judgement in drawing up the task force's mech composition.

If someone changed the job name from head designer to mech coordinator, anyone could perform this job really, though they needed to be proficient in many technical matters.

"There is one more responsibility that you should take note of. Are you aware that there is an expert mech pilot attached to your task force?"

"Ah, yes, ma'am. I was there when Major Verle asked Venerable O'Callahan to deploy. The venerable... refused."

The professor sighed and grunted in frustration. "That stubborn old coot! Venerable O'Callahan is a special individual. He has his eccentricities. In

truth, his relationship with the Vandals is less than stellar. Rather than a comrade, he is more of a mercenary of sorts."

In other words, Venerable O'Callahan was only a member of the Flagrant Vandals in name. Having heard his story, Ves knew that the expert mech pilot bounced around in the Bright Republic and the Friday Coalition before being kicked to the Vandals.

O'Callahan was undeniably an expert mech pilot. However, much like Professor Velten, the man went through a botched life-prolonging treatment. Combined with the fact that he was as old as the professor and that his growth potential had long been exhausted, nobody really valued him anymore.

It was no wonder the man degenerated into a cynical old bastard. Not every venerable lived up to their title.

A feeling of dread crept up to his body. "Do I need to be responsible for O'Callahan as well?"

"In short, yes. To be more exact, you are responsible for the upkeep of his custom mech. Every expert mech pilot in a mech regiment is accompanied by his own personal design team. You haven't met them before, but with your recent elevation to head designer, they answer to you as well."

"I take it that maintaining a custom mech is not very easy."

The professor smiled awkwardly to Ves. "I'm sure you're familiar with the saying that you get what you paid for. Behind the eye-dazzling performance of expert mechs, there is an enormous cost. To put the burden into perspective, a mech fit for an expert pilots cost as much as a combat carrier to build and maintain."

Ves wanted to puke when he heard the sum involved with maintaining a single mech. Even the Lord Javier's Loquacious Raphael wasn't that perverse!

"How... bad is the problem?"

"You do not have to take care of the design of his lancer mech. This is my own duty, and the responsibility to modify the mech to my latest iteration lies with O'Callahan's design team." She answered.

It would have been ridiculous if Ves needed to takeover the design of an expert on his own.

"Nonetheless, O'Callahan can be... demanding. The custom mech I've designed for him does not adhere to any single design. In actual fact, I've developed and maintained over twenty different variants of the same design. Each of them differ in minor ways to accommodate different environments, counters, cost and resource demands."

"Some variants are more powerful than others." Ves ventured out a guess. "Of course, the best is also the most expensive."

The professor nodded. "Venerable O'Callahan wants the best of the best. He has made that very clear to me and every mech designer that he has worked with for years. When he doesn't get his way... there is little we can do to compel him to follow orders."

An expert mech pilot was a demigod among men. Even a cranky grandpa like O'Callahan received the worship and veneration of the rank and file. From the stories of the Larkinsons, Ves knew that all of this hero worship tended to inflate the heads of expert mech pilots to a ridiculous degree.

"So when it comes down to it, I'm indirectly tasked with managing our only expert mech pilot's ego."

"You must carefully balance the needs of Venerable O'Callahan with the needs of the rest of the task force. However, no matter what you decide, you cannot afford to neglect either of them. Your escape from Vesian space depends on both numbers and quality."

Perhaps this was the most challenging and essential responsibility on his shoulders. Ves realized that managing O'Callahan formed the critical factor in keeping the mechs of the task force going. If he screwed it up entirely, their chances of escaping the Kingdom and completing their next mission would drop to nil.

Chapter 503 Dice Rolling

The Verle Task Force transitioned back into FTL immediately after the space burial. They needed to leave the vicinity of the Detemen System as soon as possible in order to throw off pursuit.

In truth, the caskets thrown out into space for the space burial might easily be detected by any scouts that entered this system. Ves guessed that Major Verle wasn't stupid enough to leave behind some breadcrumbs without a good reason. Perhaps there was a deliberate element of strategy here.

"I don't think anyone in the Kingdom expected your Vandal fleet to split up." Iris explained when she saw his puzzlement. "It's even more perplexing that this task force is heading in the opposite direction."

At the very least, it would scramble the defense forces of the Kingdom and force them to split their focus, but only up to a certain extent.

Each fief in the Kingdom hosted their own separate defense forces. Each noble House maintained their own garrison fleets that ordinarily guarded important star systems, but they were not above combining their forces and pursuing an intruding element like the Vandals passing through their domains.

Of course, each House eyed each other warily, so they wouldn't easily team up. Not even the royals possessed that much power. Even the Mech Legion couldn't resist being fractured by the competition between powerful interest groups.

"How dangerous will it be to sneak this task force to the Reinald border?" Ves asked.

"Very challenging." Iris said. "We managed to breeze through their territories because we successfully hid our presence. That's no longer an option."

"Your VRF can't keep hiding us?"

"Not when the entire Kingdom is alarmed and out for our blood. We're close to the heart of their Kingdom. There is no way the Vesian nobles will tolerate our escape. They'll deploy much more probes to the surrounding star systems. The rebel groups aligned with us can obfuscate some of the probes, but it's impossible to catch them all."

After some clarification, Iris explained that the VRF would only be able to keep their journey hidden at some points along their route. There were still many desolate star systems within the border of the Kingdom, but the odds of detection when transitioning out of FTL was roughly thirty percent.

"So one times out of three, the task force's presence is passed on to the Vesians. While that wouldn't be sufficient to catch up on us, they can make a good guess where we will transition to next and prepare enough ships to greet our arrival with a storm of fire."

"The odds of guessing our next destination shouldn't be easy." Ves pointed out. "There's dozens of potential destinations with each hop in our journey. Also, it's impossible for those selfish Houses to volunteer their valuable defense forces to clash against us wholeheartedly."

What benefit would they receive if they hindered the formidable task force? A force that consisted of half a mech regiment was no joke. Even though they split their mech compliment between spaceborn mechs and landbound mechs, not every noble House can conjure up hundreds of mechs at the snap of their fingers.

"You're right about that. Much of the Kingdom's military strength is transferred to the frontlines. With the absence of first-rate mech divisions and mech regiments, what's left behind are second-rate defense and garrison troops. They play a vital role in the defense of critical infrastructure. The moment that someone redirects these forces to somewhere else, the VRF will instantly instigate the local rebel groups to strike their defenseless assets."

In a way, this was an open conspiracy between the VRF and the noble Houses. Even if they wished to fight for the glory of taking down the intruders that brazenly raided the Detemen System, they couldn't afford to sustain any damage to their industries and defensive installations.

"Still, it's hard to believe that the Vesians don't have any large mobile assets available to defend their own territory. Or else, any random pirate swarm could have wreaked havoc within their borders."

It sounded too stupid if that was the case. The Vesia Kingdom stood stable for hundreds of years, and grew up alongside the Bright Republic that would have pounced on this weakness.

"That's the most dangerous part in our escape. The Mech Legion hasn't sent all of their mech divisions to the frontlines. Every duchy is still in the process of mobilizing their mech forces. Even if their mech divisions are incomplete, they can easily overwhelm our task force if they managed to catch up to us."

The premise here was that they could catch up to the Vandals at all. Splitting up the divisions into regiments or smaller allowed them to cast a wider net. However, the Vandals could easily pierce through a net that was spread too wide.

Basically, it all came down to luck and probability. Ves guessed that they would probably get caught a few times along their two-month journey to the Reinald Republic.

Ves summed up the task force's predicament. "It's as if we are playing a game. Each new turn, we get to take a step forward, but we also have to roll a dice. If our luck is good, nothing will happen."

When their luck took a bad turn, the task force might need to fight their way out. Battle was inevitable.

"Thus, it's important for you to get your act together, Ves. A head designer isn't just a figurehead. It's a position that demands tough decision-making. A critical oversight might lead to bad matchups in the coming battles! The lives of hundreds of mech pilots are at your mercy!"

Iris might have exaggerated a little, but Ves did wield enough influence over mech policy to affect the outcome of any battles during this period. Even if he maintained the status quo, that was also a decision in itself that may attract some blame to him if a battle went south.

At his first day of work, Ves needed to get apprised to current status of the mech companies under his purview. Naturally, Ves wouldn't be able to call up a convenient System-like Status page for every mech company, so he needed to do things the old-fashioned way.

He read. He read a lot. Major Verle's ships had a four-day journey ahead of themselves before they arrived at the next star system, so Ves spent almost every hour getting up to date.

In the meantime, he issued a broad instruction for every mech company to perform repairs at their own judgement. He only added an extra instruction to channel most of their available manpower and resources to fixing up their spaceborn mechs. Without the strength to contest in space, the task force could forget about escaping Vesian space.

For his reading marathon, Ves first tackled the welcome package sent by Professor Velten. Some of it contained regulations that reiterated the points in their discussion, but in more exact and official terms.

The most important point was that a head designer still fell outside the chain of command. Nothing changed in that matter. Ves wouldn't be able to point to a random crew member aboard the Shield of Hispania and order them around.

In practice, this meant that his scope was wide, but his actual authority was more nebulous. If he couldn't convince the mech officers and the staff officers that his decisions benefited the Vandals, they would be free to treat his words as air.

"This isn't very different from my days as an entrepreneur." He snorted. "The only thing that's different is that my customers have changed. Before, I tried to sell my mechs to the market. Now, I have to sell my proposals to a single customer."

In truth, the Flagrant Vandals didn't consist of a single 'customer' per se. Though a mech regiment imposed a high level of standardization, every mech company performed a different role. Besides distinguishing themselves as spaceborn or landbound units, they also pursued a broad specialization, such as scouting, defense or assault.

After reading the mountain of regulations, Ves dove into the nitty gritty of the Flagrant Vandals. He not only read through Velten's summary, he also dove into the databases to make his own investigations.

A clear picture started to form in his mind.

As a rule, the Vandals really liked to raid. Their spaceborn assets leaned towards lighter mechs and most of their mechs fulfilled some sort of offensive role. Their defensive capability was frankly piss-poor.

"We don't have a lot of knights or rifleman mechs on our rosters."

This presented a fairly substantial hole in their mech lineup. The Flagrant Vandals only excelled at a limited variety of mission profiles. Once they performed a mission out of their element, their strength took a nosedive.

From another perspective, the Vandals acted like a sharp and silent dagger. A large proportion of their combat carriers and mechs were quite fast, and could appear in unexpected locations with ease. Once an enemy detected their presence, they could either strike hard and fast or scurry away like cowardly rats.

"We're basically a one-trick pony."

This deliberate direction enabled the Vandals to become very good at what they did. It also earned them a decent amount of efficiency compared to a balanced mech regiment. Mech pilots could easily transfer between different mech models that performed the same role, and mech technicians were highly familiar on how to tweak the mechs to bring out their strengths.

Mechs that performed similar roles also used up the same broad pool of material types. For example, a knight mech design mainly utilized dense alloys, while a skirmisher mech exclusively made use of lightweight alloys.

Plenty of exceptions existed of course, but light and skinny medium mechs were responsible for the bulk of the task force's resource demands.

This emphasis tremendously eased the logistical burden of the Vandals. Rather than drawing up smaller amounts from a large pool of material types, they instead drew up larger amounts from a more limited pool.

It was like the difference between someone eating a varied diet of food and a crazy person that predominantly ate eggs. While the latter person also ate some fruit, vegetables and meat, but it was to such a small extent that they barely played a role.

After analyzing the task force's mech lineup from the perspective of the line officers and staff officers, he turned his attention to the giant anomaly in their midst.

"The professor wasn't kidding that maintaining an expert pilot costs as much as a combat carrier!"

The abundant amount of money in the form of resources spent on upkeep, repairs and overhauls easily surpassed several billion credits on an annual basis.

Even a normal mech regiment would have a heart attack if they wished to support an extra expert pilot!

This black hole in their roster and budget swallowed so many resources that even the Vandals couldn't bear the expenditure. Digging a little further into the database, Ves found out that the Vandals actually retained two expert pilots!

"They're already in the red for supporting one expert pilot. Adding another is straining their budget to the bursting point!"

The dire financial position of the Vandals could partially be attributed on their insistence in supporting two expert pilots. Some mech regiments outright went without any expert pilots because they couldn't find any or bear the cost of upkeep!

Naturally, the saying that you got what you paid for also applied in this case. An expert pilot paired with a supremely built expert mech formed a very powerful spearhead that could be sent to accomplish the impossible.

For someone like Venerable O'Callahan, fighting one against hundred wasn't out of the question.

"At least it's a good thing that he's piloting a spaceborn mech."

O'Callahan piloted a lancer mech, which was basically a spearman mech with a flight system. His mech excelled in duels where its lance could chew up any enemy mech in its way with a single charge. The only demerit to this mode of combat was that he couldn't eliminate mechs in a group.

"That should be another deliberate choice." Ves mused. "The regular Vandals can take care of the cannon fodder. O'Callahan should only be brought out when the enemy threatens our rank-and-file with elites."

The Venerable's lancer mech could also be converted into an aerial mech that was suitable to operating within the gravity well of a planet. The conversion process demanded a lot of time and resources, though, so the switch needed to be done well in advance.

All in all, the mechs of the task force appeared to be very strong in writing. However, Ves also spotted the cracks while riding between the lines.

Chapter 504 Minute Discrepancies

The official reports and summaries painted a fairly rosy picture of the mechs he needed to take care of. Even a three-year old child could spot that the people who wrote these reports tried to paint themselves in the the most favorable light.

They might not be telling outright lies, but there were many ways someone could massage a report. Ves did it plenty of times in school when an assignment was due but hadn't spent enough time in his studies.

Fortunately, very few of the people who wrote the reports had mastered the dark arts of bureaucracy, so Ves easily deduced their transparent attempts.

By and large, most mech captains demanded more or better resources. Both of these demands came with different benefits. Allocating more resources to their units allowed them to bounce back faster after sustaining losses. Raising their allowance better resources allowed them to upgrade their mechs.

Some mech companies wanted to build up a deeper reserve. Others wanted to raise the overall quality of their mech roster. The greediest mech companies even begged for both.

Fortunately, the mech captains already got used to being rejected. No matter how much they whined, the people in charge of procurement and resource management couldn't conjure materials out of thin air.

Still, the constant exaggerations in the reports made it difficult for Ves to get a true picture of their current state. Ves needed to dig beyond that and study individual maintenance reports and such to get at the heart of the matter.

This was extremely tedious work. A regular person needed months to process all of the documents. They not only needed to pick the most relevant files to read, they also had to recognize the most relevant data and interpret them into useful information.

Leaving the work aside to AIs provided unreliable conclusions, because Ves quickly realized the raw data had been fudged as well.

"It doesn't take that much volume to replace a chest plate."

The AIs hadn't been trained to pick up these subtle irregularities in the data. Even an average mech designer wouldn't be able to spot the differences, because they often skirted around the margin of error.

Basically, it was as if Ves told a kid to purchase lunch for himself. The kid runs to a sandwich store and then comes back to Ves to tell him that it costs 2 credits for a sandwich. Ves had no reason to doubt this price, so he casually transfers the credits to the kid, who proceeded to buy his lunch.

In actual fact, the kid hadn't been entirely accurate when he reported the price. The sandwich actually cost 1.99 credits, which amounted to a discrepancy of 0.5 percent.

"A loss of half a percent isn't much in normal circumstances." Ves determined. "But at the scale the Vandals are working with, it's a serious problem."

Nobody cared about this problem if it happened in a low-level situation such as a kid trying to fool their parents. The parents only lost 0.01 credits, which was an absolute pittance to even the poorest citizens of the Republic.

Mech regiments operated at a scale of billions of credits. The upkeep of a standard mech company that consisted of forty active mechs and twenty or so reserve mechs already amounted to tens of millions of credits.

Naturally, this credit sum would easily spike in the hundreds of millions of credits after every operation when a mech company sustained several casualties. These periods of intense demands and vigorous repairs led to a large amount of resource transfers.

It would be easy to slip in a discrepancy in the midst of all of this activity.

Frankly, if Ves hadn't started up his own business from the ground up and fabricated many copies of his own designs, he wouldn't have developed an eye for this sort of stuff. The covert manipulation of resource usage effectively amounted to embezzlement.

His face grew dire at this realization. Who was responsible? Who would enrich themselves or increase their leverage at the cost of the entire mech regiment?

"The mech officers probably aren't in it." He quickly determined. "They don't have the technical acumen to pull off this kind of heist."

Besides, their whiny reports emphasized other faults.

That left Ves with three categories of culprits that he could think of. "It's either the mech technicians, the mech designers, the logistics officers, or a combination."

He ruled out the latter two. A conspiracy between multiple parties involved too many people. News would get out sooner or later in that case. As for the people responsible for logistics, having worked alongside them for a time, Ves knew that they held themselves to a rigid standard of precision.

One of the things he learned from Professor Velten's reports was that logistics had often been in a state of shambles with the Vandals. The lack of talent sent in their way and the dubious integrity of anyone exiled to their mech regiment meant that their records were filled with lies. Their account books contained more imagination than fantasy books and various discrepancies brazen exceeded fifty percent.

Colonel Lowenfield's arrival to the Vandals upended their awful tradition of sloppy record-keeping. She overhauled the logistics department of the Vandals from the ground up. She kicked out or demoted the worst offenders while forcing the remainder into gruelling re-training sessions.

The Vandals kicked and screamed when they had to go through this painful reorganization process, but it was an act akin to cutting out the sickened flesh from a diseased body. Over time, the Flagrant Vandals enjoyed the benefits of cleaning up their act.

As one of her most important pet projects, the transformation of logistics should have been a continued priority of Colonel Lowenfield. Under her persistent gaze, nobody would even think of skimming from the top.

"So it's either the mech technicians or the mech designers who are taking advantage of this somehow."

The main question rolling in his mind was how someone benefited from the embezzlement. It wasn't as if anyone could expect to hide a few hundred tons of alloys underneath their bunks.

"The materials being embezzled will need to be used immediately. They can't be stored for long, or else the pervasive monitoring system in every ship will pick up the goods."

Ves tried to imagine how it could work. He envisioned a situation where some low level mech technician inputted a resource usage of 5000 kilograms of lightweight alloys, but his actual usage only amounted to 4975 kilograms. That left this mech technician with a small but fairly substantial surplus of 25 kilograms, which would be worth tens of thousands of credits if sold in the open market.

"How can that low level mech technician transform 25 kilograms into actual credits?"

Ves saw no way this could be done, not without the Vandals detecting something fishy.

"Maybe it's not about earning credits."

Perhaps the illicit trade took the form of an internal black market among the Vandals. Perhaps the mech technicians became tired of working under scarcity, and developed this method as a way to get their hands on critical materials that the high and mighty wizards that worked at logistics refused to dispense in their hands.

This sounded a lot more innocuous than trying to sell the embezzlement materials in exchange for money. While it was still an unacceptable practice, it fell into the maxim that the Vandals needed to get things done no matter the rules.

In such a case, Ves didn't feel inclined to stamp it out as long as the embezzlement remained within the range of the margin of error. He knew that being uptight in a mech regiment with a fairly weak tradition for exactness spelled a lot of trouble.

In the end, Ves wrote up a report of his observations and backed them up with proof from the data available to him. After some thought, he marked his report as sensitive. Only Major Verle and his staff would be allowed to read its contents.

"Iris."

"Yes, boss?" The woman looked up from her desk.

"Please bring this secure data chip to Major Verle or Lieutenant Commander Soapstone."

Iris stood up from her chair and walked over to receive the data chip. "Who do you want me to approach first?"

"Try bringing it to the attention of the major if you can. If not, you can try your luck with Soapstone. Whatever you do, don't let anyone else receive the data chip. Its contents are fairly sensitive."

Iris threw a questioning gaze at Ves, but he refrained from throwing her a hint. Perhaps he was making a mountain out of a molehill, but he really didn't wish to leak out his suspicions. If the more serious kind of embezzlement happened under the table, then he risked making powerful enemies among the Vandals.

Now that he wore the hat of head designer, he needed to rely on trust, persuasion and mutual interest in order to enact his changes. Burning his bridges with the offending party within the first days of his job was a one-way ticket to irrelevance.

Ves watched her leave their combined office and hoped that the major wouldn't refuse the data chip.

Early on, he memorized the names of the staff under Major Verle. He found out that Lieutenant Commander held the reins with regards to resource

procurement and allocation. As the powerful staff officer in charge of logistics, she could directly empower or cripple a mech company in the task force according to her whims.

Of course, Soapstone wouldn't get away with overt favoritism. In fact, from the rumors he heard, Soapstone was one of Lowenfield's protégés.

One of the more peculiar aspects of logistics officers was that they would sometimes be fulfilled by someone holding a naval rank rather than a mech rank. The Mech Corps operated on a weird organizational structure where the mech officers held army-like ranks while the ship officers adopted naval ranks.

This might lead to confusion sometimes, but overall the primacy of mech officers was well-established. Back in the Age of Conquest, an admiral was more powerful than the president of a state. The power to determine the life and death of entire planets was a powerful drug.

Now that humanity reached the Age of Mechs, nobody would bat an eyelid if a mech captain issued orders to a fleet commander.

Ship officers worked in the background these days, so nobody found it strange that they would be subordinated in such a fashion.

When Ves entrusted the data chip to Iris, he wasn't afraid she would succeed in cracking it and peek at its contents. While the Flagrant Vandals endured lot of neglect from headquarters, they still enjoyed access to their central database, thereby allowing them to employ the latest technologies available to the Mech Corps.

The military-grade data chip that Ves handed over to Iris came packed with a dizzying array of security features, all without adding to its bulk. The moment someone tried to tamper with it, the entire data chip would go up in flames and melt into a useless puddle of alloys and composites. Nobody could retrieve

any data from the melted chip unless they possessed the power to turn back time.

Besides, with the ever-present monitoring going on, Iris would never have the opportunity to fudge the data chip, even if she visited the toilet.

Half an hour later, Iris returned. "Major Verle probably likes you a lot, because once I told him that the data chip, he immediately accepted it. He pushed aside his other work and started digging into it immediately."

"Did he tell you anything or pass on a message to me?"

"Not as far as I'm aware of, boss." She replied. "A few seconds in, he shrugged and dropped his smile. I think he deliberately adopted a poker face in front of me. He also activated a privacy screen around his desk after shooping me away."

That didn't tell Ves very much. In the back of his mind, there was always a chance that Major Verle might have a hand in the embezzlement. If this sort of dealings happened with the blessings of the major himself, then Ves might have landed himself in a very deep swamp.

He still had his principles though. Ves made his choice. Now the ball was in the major's court.

Chapter 505 Profiteering

It didn't take long before Ves received a summons from Major Verle. He calmly closed his terminal and closed his eyes.

"Seems like this is a serious issue after all."

The level of embezzlement that happened on an individual level wasn't too great, but when it had reached such a scale that practically every workshop was involved, the losses added up.

If all of the profits from these activities channeled in a small number of masterminds, then what Ves reported just threatened their livelihood.

The one thing he was afraid of most was that this level of corruption had reached the highest level. If Major Verle or Lieutenant Commander Soapstone received a cut of the profits, then Ves enormously harmed his relations with two of the most powerful officers in the Verle Task Force.

"Still, I can't sit still and do nothing."

Though Ves readily admitted to himself that he wasn't above pulling dirty tricks, he hated it when others tried to pull the wool over his eyes. Now that he accepted the job of head designer, everything concerning mechs came under his purview. Ves was not the type of person who tolerated employee theft.

"Urgh. I'm thinking of the Vandals like a business again." He shook his head.

He couldn't help but make the parallels between his job as a head designer and his status as a business owner of the LMC.

It would be a mistake to adopt this mindset, because the web of power was much more complex here. Back at the LMC, he was not only the founder and sole designer, Ves also relied on his majority ownership to exert total control.

While his reliance on agents and employees effectively limited his power, it remained a fact that Ves held ultimate authority over his firm.

In the Vandal command structure, the mech officers formed the main combatants as well as the main decision makers. The ship and staff officers on the other hand mainly executed the decisions made by the mech officers.

Mech designers like Ves existed outside of this command structure, and acted more like external consultants. Even Professor Velten who shared the most intimate relationship with the Vandals held no military rank.

Because Ves fell outside the conventional command structure, he also benefited from a different perspective. That was why he went through with informing Major Verle of his findings. Even if he pissed some powerful Vandals off, they couldn't do anything to him, at least outwardly. The most they could do was try to marginalize his influence.

If that happened, so be it, but Ves cooked up several plans that would counteract their petty attempts. Ves may not be a Journeyman Mech Designer, but his skills overshadowed everyone else's in the fleet.

If it came down to it, Ves wasn't above pulling up his sleeves to impress the savages of what a good mech designer could bring to the table.

As Ves stood up and exited his office, Iris called out to him just as the hatch slid open.

"Boss! Are you going out?"

"Yeah, it seems like what I dug up requires an immediate response. Stay here and keep collating the data."

"Will do."

After Ves made his initial discoveries, he didn't feel like digging into the data anymore. He pushed some of the duties onto Iris, who unfortunately couldn't match his Intelligence.

Ves keenly witnessed the difference between his own capabilities and someone with more human-like Intelligence values. Despite benefiting from a minor boost in mental capacity due to her Jupiter Family heritage, she required weeks to do what Ves could complete in a day.

This must be another reason why Professor Velten thought he would be suitable to take on the role of head designer. He processed data faster than others, which helped enormously in a data-oriented job like his. Head

designers needed to make difficult decisions according to the information at hand, and Ves could take in much more information at much higher speeds, so he possessed a definite advantage in this area.

Any other mech designer thrust into this seat would quickly be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of data required to make the right decisions. They could either spend months getting familiar with their position or take some shortcuts and enact policies based on an incomplete understanding of the situation.

"Such outcomes will inevitably lead to disaster."

When Ves stepped into Major Verle's stateroom, he glanced around as his steps brought him to one of the available seats.

The major didn't have time to furnish his stateroom according to his tastes. He must have lost everything he owned when the Stubby Growler went down. The metallic walls looked grey and bare while the furniture all consisted of the most basic copies that any mech technician could fabricate according to a standard template.

This was a good sign to Ves, because the bare furnishings signalled that Verle didn't care for material possessions.

"You've given me quite a conundrum, Mr. Larkinson." Verle started as he shut off his terminal, leaving his desk bare. He stared at Ves with inscrutable eyes.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Ves couldn't read any hint of Verle's intentions. Was he pleased that Ves brought the matter to his attention, or had he encroached upon a taboo?

He made a conscious choice to force the issue at the start. He disliked uncertainty, and he would rather not have this cloud hanging over his head. Now was the time to see why Colonel Lowenfield trusted the major so much.

"Sir, as the newly appointed head designer of this fleet, it's my responsibility to see that our mechs are as capable as possible to handle the threats in our way. The possible embezzlement happening under the table is a small but wide-reaching influence on our strength."

"How can it be both small but wide-reaching?"

"Like a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the planet, the effects can lead to a typhoon on the other side of the globe. The siphoning of resources away from their intended purposes effectively leaves our mech companies with 0.5 percent less resources. This might not sound like much, but at a scale of five-hundred spaceborn mechs, this loss amounts to missing two or three complete mechs."

"And this is relevant because...?"

"Think about it. If we get ambushed at our next stop by five-hundred enemy mechs, and we deploy 497 mechs in response, that gap could mean the difference between victory and defeat."

Ves didn't need to explain it any further. In closely-matched battles, the ultimate victor would often be decided by the side who could tip the balance in their favor. If both sides enjoyed an even playing field in terms of mech quality and mech composition, a minor advantage in numbers would eventually lead to a decisive advantage in numbers.

Even if both sides didn't commit, a handful of extra mechs could drastically influence the amount of casualties both sides sustained.

"Is our spaceborn contingent in that bad of a state?" Verle asked.

"Their state is fairly good, since they mainly scored a lopsided victory in the Detemen System. By now, most mechs that have sustained damage are in a decent shape, though it will take the more heavily damaged mechs a little more time to become space worthy again. I'm not worried about the present.

I'm concerned about the future. If this wasteful pattern continues, we'll continue to suffer preventable losses."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I'm very sure of it, sir. You're the expert in mech tactics, so I'm sure you have a better idea at how this could lead to unnecessary losses."

The major fell silent and tapped his desk with his finger. "Have you narrowed down who's responsible for these actions?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "It will take a more thorough investigation to get at the root of the problem. I can point out the mech technicians who are incorrectly logging their resource usages, but I have the feeling that they aren't the main beneficiaries of this scheme. Whoever is responsible for selling of trading the siphoned materials should be the true masterminds."

"I see. If you had the power to respond to this issue, what would you do?"

That might have been a loaded question, but Ves felt obligated to answer it. After a lot of thought about his new role, he gained some enlightenment about the purpose of mech designers attached to mech regiments.

Mech officers were the people in charge. That never changed. Everyone else assisted them in the background. As a mech designer and a head designer to boot, Ves was tasked with the responsibility to advise Major Verle so that he could make the most important decisions after taking everything into account.

With this role in mind, Ves provided several answers. "It depends on what kind of goal I want to achieve. If I wish to send a clear message that activities like this that harm our common interests will not be tolerated, I would investigate it thoroughly and punish the offenders according to the strictest regulations."

"The penalties for embezzlement can be quite severe."

"They played with fire, they should expect to get burned. We are not talking about innocent people here. Even if it isn't as bad as they look like, unauthorized shuffling of materials is still a moderate offense that needs to be cracked down."

"So do you believe that this is the option that we should be pursuing?"

"Ah, there are other options available as well, sir. If we crack down too hard, we might upset a lot of people, which would lead to a lot of resentment and division. We can't afford internal division while the task force is still at risk of getting caught by the Vesians on their own turf. If the problem needs to be taken care of with some finesse, we can also opt for a softer touch."

"A slap on the wrist." Verle deducted. "That will send a weak message to the offenders. It will reinforce the belief that the embezzlers are impervious and that we don't have the guts to incur their wrath."

"Still, dealing with people with overblown senses of importance is better if you still have them on your side. That's why I suggested this option."

They both paused a bit as they contemplated the two options with two very different outcomes. While Ves came up with these possible responses by himself, he couldn't say which one would be better.

Cracking down on the practice would hurt the cohesion of the Flagrant Vandals in the short term. The damage could be quite severe if a lot of powerful people had their fingers in the pot. Yet by bringing the hurt forward, the Vandals would be able to clean up their act in one go, which was better for everyone in the long term.

As for the other options, it led to the least amount of hurt in the short term, but did not effectively solve the problem at all. Perhaps it would depress any illicit activities for a few weeks, but the masterminds would not be deterred to pick

up their shady dealings again. They might have even learned their lessons this time and spend more effort on hiding their trails.

In either case, further investigation was necessary to figure out the extent of the profiteering.

After a lengthy pause, Verle came to a decision on what to do. "Both of your options have their strong points, but there are more ways to address this problem than these two extremes. You still lack experience in this area."

Ves sat up straighter. He was curious what Verle really thought about the matter. It sounded like he wasn't involved after all.

"I agree with you that this problem needs to be nipped in the bud. Now that it's been brought to my attention, I won't rest easy until this activity ceases. Yet tact is important. Our ultimate goal is to make it to the Reinald Republic alive, so I cannot afford to put some of my most subordinates in the brig."

Chapter 506 Priorities

Major Verle finally explained his solution to Ves. "Rules are rules, but the mission is more important. Exacting justice on the offenders might soothe your conscious, but it will only weaken our strength."

"That sounds as if you favor a slap on the wrist." Ves carefully said, though he couldn't stop from frowning. "From my impression of the Vandal mech technicians, there is a large proportion of bad apples among them. They won't stop trying to take advantage of the system."

The Mech Corps never sent any promising people to the Flagrant Vandals. Everyone had their issues, and the mech technicians wasn't exempt from this problem. While the chief technicians mostly helped rein in their small-minded thoughts, chiefs could only keep their eyes on so many things.

"As I stated, the most important priority is to maintain our strength. The best way to do so is to stop the embezzlement without affronting the so-called

masterminds as you call it. This can be done by adopting both solutions, but at different timings."

Ves tried to wrap his head around the idea. He started to get his eyes on a glimpse of such a plan. "Warn them first, and crack down hard if they persist?"

"In essence, that is correct. Call it starting from a clean slate if you will." Major Verle nodded. "First, in order to minimize the unrest, it's best if we do not give out the impression that we have locked onto their scent. Instead, you can come up with a scheme where you'll claim to introduce a new resource tracking system to replace the old one. The men won't question this change because it's typical for a new boss to implement bold ideas."

"It's going to take a lot of work to replace the software, sir." Ves carefully pointed out. "It's not something that can be done in a day."

"That's even better! The ideal transition time should be a week. That's enough time for everyone to clean up their acts and sweep their misdeeds under the rug. Once the new system is in place, everyone should have made up their minds. Those who are smart or careful may have gotten the message. It's not a coincidence that the resource management system has received an overhaul."

"What about those who haven't gotten the message, sir? Maybe the embezzlers are shrewd, but there are a fair amount of low-level people involved who aren't as perceptive. There's also the greedy ones who don't wish to relinquish their power."

Major Verle leaned back on his chair and waved his hand. "Idiots like these who scorn the opportunities I've given to them to start with a clean slate don't deserve any consideration. We'll investigate them and throw the book at them for any offenses they've committed after the new system is in place. I'd rather

have them out of way no matter how important their positions are because I can't trust these scum to have my back in a fight."

In other words, the idiots that continued to hold small thoughts did more damage than what they contributed back to the Vandals. Major Verle wouldn't be merciful to these cancerous growths.

The contempt sounded obvious in the major's voice. Ves looked impressed at the commanding officer of the task force for coming up with such an elegant solution. It contained both mercy and resolve, and throughout it all it ensured the Vandals maintained their best strength.

"I understand now." Ves nodded, his eyes shining bright. "Still, some important people might get caught at the end. Their absence might affect the task force's condition more than the absence of a few mechs."

That was the sticking point with any solution that advocated for crackdowns. Even though Major Verle's suggestion provided a lot more leeway, it still needed to be backed up examples. If someone like a chief technician got caught, then the maintenance department of an entire combat carrier might fall into chaos.

"There is a limit to our patience. We need to send the right message and draw a line in the sand. It's fine if people are playing tricks, but once they are caught, they better look honest. This was Colonel Lowenfield's stance when she first reformed the Flagrant Vandals."

"I understand. Thank you for telling me this, sir."

"It is good that you've brought this up to me shortly after you have discovered this. An issue of this nature isn't something that you should decide on your own."

Ves and Major Verle hammered out the details in the next half hour. Ves needed to borrow some people and receive the right authority to push through

this overhaul, which Major Verle directly granted in his name. With Verle backing this decision, it wouldn't take more than week to update the resource management system, though it would take some time to iron out the wrinkles.

After Ves left his stateroom, he came out of it with a much better impression of his superior. The man patiently explained his thoughts during the discussion and decision-making process. This allowed Ves to understand his priorities.

The overarching message was that their survival and the completion of the mission ranked as the highest priorities. Major Verle wouldn't have bothered with this relatively small case of embezzlement if hadn't affected the overall strength of his forces. He also didn't appear to feel compelled to act on it in times of peace.

Sadly, times had changed, and the Bright Republic had been plunged into war. The Flagrant Vandals successfully completed an operation that slapped the Vesians in the face, and now they were on the run.

Under these conditions, it was no surprise that Major Verle pursued every possible solution that could raise their fighting strength.

With a new set of orders in store, Ves returned to his office and prepared a proposal. The most challenging aspect about the change was that Ves needed to find the right software to replace the old one. The central database that Ves now had access to offered more than a dozen software packages. It gave Ves quite a headache to dig through the jargon.

Still, Ves only spent a few hours before he picked a replacement package. Now he needed to implement it throughout the entire task force.

"Iris."

"Yes, boss?"

"Please schedule an immediate meeting on this ship to every mech designer in the fleet. Set the time at half an hour after we drop out of FTL."

Iris looked startled. "Uh, do you want to invite every mech designer, or only the high-ranking ones?"

Ves thought about it. The high-ranking mech designers consisted of those who previously worked in the design team, while the lower-ranking ones were like Carlos who worked alongside the mech technicians.

Considering that the change affected the latter more than the former, Ves decided to invite everyone. "Bring them all. It will be good for them to meet their new superior in person at least once."

It wasn't as if Ves had the time to hop into a shuttle and pay a visit to the forty-odd ships that made up the task force. The inability for shuttles to travel from one ship to another during FTL formed the main limiting factor.

Even if an entire fleet transitioned into FTL in the same direction under identical circumstances, a ship often fell into their own band of dimension as it were. In general, a ship in FTL would never be able to interact with any other ships in FTL.

Of course, it wasn't unheard of for something like that to happen anyway. Rumor had it that the CFA, MTA and the first-rate superstates mastered technologies that made FTL warfare possible.

Those same rumors stated that trying to wage a battle in FTL was a massive pain in the butt, so almost no one bothered with it unless a ship carried a vital objective.

"Do you wish to tell the mech designers the items on the agenda, sir?"

"No need to bother, Iris, although tell them that the meeting might drag on for half a day, so make sure their schedules are cleared. I won't tolerate any absences."

"Understood, though I'd caution you that it's not good for the fleet if they are absent from their posts for too long. They play an important role aboard those ships as mech experts. Without their hands-on guidance, the mech technicians won't know what to do."

"They'll make do without one for a day. It's very important for me to meet all the mech designers in person."

Ves planned to take the opportunity for this meeting to accomplish multiple objectives at once. Besides announcing the software system change, he also wanted to appraise his subordinates in person and see whether they measured up. He planned to select two or three as his deputies.

He hadn't forgotten about the importance of delegation. Ves could not possibility keep his eye on everything that needed to be done. The software change alone might stall to a month if Ves lacked capable underlings to check all the work being done at his direction.

Picking a handful of mech designers elevating them to a position of power over their colleagues should help with widening his reach. While Ves had no delusions that the people he promoted would turn into his loyal subjects, Ves would always be able to strip them of their authority if they abused his trust.

"Do you want to invite Venerable O'Callahan's design team as well?"

Ves froze for a moment, before coming up with a response. "No. They require a special touch. I'll address them separately at a later date."

The expert pilot's design time nominally came under his purview, but Ves felt much less confident about being able to command their respect. These mech

designers worked hard and tried to do their best to enter the venerable's design team.

"They've probably turned into total fanboys for O'Callahan by this time."

The hero worship surrounding expert pilots often reached a dreadful state. Some even enjoyed the adoration of trillions of people across the galaxy as some of their exploits would be broadcasted throughout the galactic net.

Even a washed-up senile expert pilot like O'Callahan enjoyed a lot of renown with the Vandals. Whenever Ves ate his meals at the mess hall, he occasionally overheard the spacers treating the expert mech pilot's presence in their task force as a point of pride.

Only a few Vandals knew about the true character of O'Callahan. The first time Ves heard his voice, the expert pilot refused to sortie on command! He directly disobeyed an order from Major Verle. Even worse, the venerable got away with it without a scratch!

"Maybe that's why the major is rather sensitive about this issue."

Due to O'Callahan's unique position, Major Verle could never sanction the proud symbol of their mech regiment. If word got out that the Vandals quarreled with the venerable, morale would instantly drop to the bottom, because the men might start to believe that O'Callahan wouldn't defend the Vandals with all of his heart.

Once Iris sent out the invitations, Ves began to make his preparations. He studied the software package and began to draft up a plan that would implement them on any machine related to resource usage.

He also made some other preparations to accomplish his other goals at the same time, and also diverted some time in studying the profiles of the other mech designers. These would be the only people he possessed the authority to command.

"They won't be happy for a relative newcomer like me to obtain the position of head designer."

The Mech Corps managed its mech designers in two different ways. The internal mech designers consisted of careerists who voluntarily signed up to serve for at least ten years. They contributed a lot of work to their mech regiments and accumulated a lot of seniority.

Ves fell into the category of external mech designers. He wouldn't have been here if the Mech Corps hadn't drafted him due to the outbreak of the current war. The difference between him and the internal mech designers was that Ves held no seniority at all.

Having mixed with the Flagrant Vandals for a long time, Iris explained it succinctly. "Some of these internal mech designers are very ambitious. They've been working diligently for a promotion. Those who do well even get the privilege of receiving Professor Velten's personal tutelage. Think about how they must feel how their hard-earned merits are ignored when the position of head designers have passed over their heads."

This was a serious contradiction that Ves needed to deal with as early as possible.

Chapter 507 Vying for the Job

The Verle Task Force transitioned out of FTL at the outer edge of a boring red dwarf system. Due to minute variances in the FTL drives, tiny discrepancies got magnified into substantial divergences. Major Verle's ships spread out in a messy shotgun pattern that opened them up to a devastating ambush.

Fortunately, none of the ships detected any ships or mechs or weapon emplacements in the immediate vicinity.

Nobody let down their guard. The combat carriers adopted an immediate defensive posture and the entire fleet contracted in a defensive formation.

It took fifteen minutes of intensive scanning before everyone eased up the tension in their bodies. Besides a light rebel presence, the uninhabited star system contained no overt threats.

The fleet cautiously approached an asteroid field. It would take some hours to arrive and many more hours to mine some low-quality ores. While the asteroids didn't contain anything valuable, there were many uses for common materials, such as replenishing their ammunition which they used up at a massive scale during the Detemen Operation.

"The mech designers are on their way, boss." Iris reported to Ves. "Their shuttles will dock at the Shield of Hispania no later than twenty minutes. Inter-ship traffic is currently hectic so expect some delays."

"That's okay. Has anyone declined the invitation to meet?"

"Surprisingly not. Every high and low-ranking mech designer answered your summons."

With no problems there, Ves waited for the moment to arrive while Iris went off to prepare the conference room. He thought about his job and found fulfilling it to be a demanding job. Trying to solve every problem within his scope was frankly impossible, but somehow he had taken a liking of trying to achieve the impossible.

It was different from growing a business. Back when he built up the LMC until it could stand on its own two feet, he enjoyed a lot of freedom and held the ultimate authority over how it should be run.

Yet now he answered to Major Verle. Not only that, he needed to maintain relationships with everyone involved in order to get things done. It demanded a different approach where he became dependent on others to reciprocate.

Ves cherished this opportunity because it allowed him to build up valuable experience in leading design teams later on. As long as he got the knack of

managing the mech designers assigned to the Flagrant Vandals, he would easily be able to manage design teams working for the LMC.

Half an hour later, the conference room became packed with mech designers arranged in classroom-style seating. When Ves entered the room, he observed an obvious division between two types of mech designers.

Those at the front looked familiar to Ves. He recognized many of them from the Inheritor, Akkara and Hellcat design teams. Excluding Ves, there was only nine of them present in the Verle Task Force. All of them had been cut off from the Wolf Mother which accompanied the primary Vandal fleet.

A larger number of mech designers sat at the rear. Iris must have arranged an obvious gap in the seating between the two groups to emphasize the differences between the two. Despite numbering around thirty people, none of them had a say due to their inferior standing and skills.

When Ves stared at the low-ranking mech designers. He memorized their names beforehand out of due diligence, but he didn't expect to call on any of them unless they screwed up their jobs. His weighty stare intimidated the low-ranking mech designers. All of them chose to lower their heads in a sign of submission.

Only a handful of mech designers tried to keep up a confident facade. Ves deliberately carried himself in a compelling manner and concentrated his mind in an attempt to conjure up an aura of blood and war.

The results were inconclusive. Some of the weaker-willed mech designers appeared to be affected, but any mech designer that worked alongside the Vandals got used to working with professional killers and raiders. Compared to a genuine mech officer such as Captain Orfan or Captain Branser, his own aura fell short.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard the flagship." Ves began as he approached the front of the conference room. "I'm sure you already know this, but my name is Ves Larkinson, and I'm the temporary head designer of the Verle Task Force. I've called you here to explain my vision to you so that we are all on the same track. I'll also be introducing some new policies and directives so that we can be of more help to the fleet that has landed itself in a precarious situation."

Someone raised his hand.

"Mr. Mercator, you wish to say something?"

Ves encountered Bovis Mercator a couple of times when they worked aboard the Wolf Mother. He never saw too much of Mercator because the man had been assigned to the Akkara design team.

Mercator happened to be one of the older Apprentice Mech Designers among them. His outward appearance suggested that he reached his early forties.

"Mr. Larkinson, forgive my rudeness, but the leadership issue isn't settled yet. You're too new to the Vandals, and you've only been appointed to become the task force's head designer because you happen to be the closest mech designer to Major Verle. Now that we aren't fleeing at full tilt from the Vesian reinforcement fleets, we should revisit some of the decisions made in haste."

"Oh really?" Ves narrowed his eyes at Mercator.

The careerist mech designer didn't hide his ambition. In fact, he stood with a confident demeanor, as if his words made a lot of sense.

Over half of the high-ranking mech designers happened to nod in agreement. Most of them belonged to the same clique of careerists as Mercator. If it came to a vote, Ves had no doubt that he would lose. He was never one for popularity contests, and his background was too shallow among the mech designers working for the Vandals.

Ves minutely shook his head. He would never let this discussion come to a vote.

"Mr. Mercator, I think you misunderstand something. My appointment to head designer is arranged by Professor Velten. Major Verle might have a say in the matter, but it's the professor who put her stamp of approval in my field promotion. If you believe the professor has made an error, you are free to bring your complaints to her doorstep."

The older mech designer's face quickly turned red. Obviously, nobody had the guts to question one of the professor's decision. Even if her mind was wracked with senility, her dignity was inviolable to mech designers in the same way that mech pilots would never dare to offend Venerable O'Callahan.

Surprisingly enough, Mercator remained standing. "Even if that is true, it still doesn't change the fact that your abrupt elevation is a highly unusual irregular. As a young, conscripted mech designer, you are too new to the Flagrant Vandals. There are many, more experienced mech designers in this room that are a tad more suitable to the position."

The lower-ranking mech designers smelled a power play. Most of them kept themselves as still as possible to avoid getting caught up with a particular side. There was no advantage for them to commit to a single high-ranking mech designer when they would likely need to work under several of them in the foreseeable future.

Only a handful expressed support to Mercator's suggestion. There was no question these designers were in his camp.

Ves crossed his arms and smirked. "I suppose you're volunteering for the job, then?"

Maybe his confidence unnerved Mercator. Things weren't entirely going according to his script. The careerist visibly hesitated for a moment before he firmed up his resolve.

"I am." He stated and turned around to address the other mech designers in the room. "Most of you have seen me around. I've been working with the Vandals for over four years, and while that may not sound so much, I have worked in several other mech division of the Mech Corps over a span of fifteen years. My extensive experience in working in many different design teams makes me the best choice to lead you all. Think for yourself who you want to rely on more, a conscripted young designer whose heart isn't in it, or a mech designer who is fully committed to the Vandals?"

A low thrum of conversation broke out as several mech designers nodded or started to discuss the matter. Ves didn't enforce a silence because it hardly affected his own plan. It might even be better to keep them talking.

His evident decision to keep his mouth shut gave the mech designers the sense that Ves had no power to avoid this leadership struggle. Some even believed his silence at this moment was a tacit admission that Mercator had a point.

As expected, someone else couldn't let the older man hog all of the momentum. A woman in her thirties stood up. "Bovis, there are several mech designers among us that can lead us, but you aren't qualified. Just look at you! You're almost fifty and you're nowhere near advancing to a Journeyman Mech Designer! A talentless hack like you will command our respect!"

"Emlanin! Just because your uncle is a mech captain of the Vandals doesn't mean you're suitable! The only reason why you're so prominent lately is because your uncle constantly puts a good word for you in everyone's ears!"

Ves looked at the woman who stood up. He remembered her. Emlanin Trozin, a fellow colleague in the Hellcat design team. For her age, she possessed a decent amount of talent, and it was obvious that she used that advantage to attack Mercator's prestige.

"The job of head designer should fall on someone who can grow into the job!" Trozin claimed.

"Nonsense! Head designers must be capable right at the start! Someone like you needs years to get used to the job! The mission can't wait that long!"

Ves coughed and raised his palm. "Quiet down."

Raising his palm was a signal to Iris to dampen the conversation. She sat unobtrusively in the corner of the conference room. The moment she spotted the raised palm, she quietly activated a setting on her comm.

The conference room immediately fell into silence as everyone that opened their mouths only let out empty air. Hidden dampeners built along the walls neutralized all the sounds that escaped from their throats.

"Good. If I can have your attention please. It's obvious that the leadership issue needs to be settled today. I won't be a tyrant and insist on sticking to my job. In the interest of fairness, I believe that anyone who wants to throw their hats into the ring should compete against each other. Now, who wants to be the head designer?"

Four high-ranking mech designers raised their heads, including Mercator and Trozin.

Ves nodded. "Alright, that's five if you count me in. Now, we can settle the leadership issue in multiple ways. Rather than flap our mouths with endless boasts and empty promises, I think it's better to resort to a more objective means of comparison."

This was where he sprung his trap. His grin grew wider.

"Let's hold a five-way design duel."

Iris released the sound dampening at that moment, causing the 'contestants' to erupt in protest.

"That's not fair, Mr. Larkinson!" Mercator yelled in a shrill voice. "We are not brutes like mech pilots who like to settle every difference with a duel! We are mech designers! More than that, we work for the Mech Corps, not for ourselves! This isn't the private sector that you are used to. We work in cooperation, not in competition with each other!"

Trozin put in her own objection. "I don't often agree with Bovis, but he's right. Design duels simply aren't done in our circle. As mech designers of the Mech Corps, we are always put to work on smaller aspects of specific projects. We have never been given the opportunity design a mech or variant on our own. It's highly unfair for you to propose we duel someone like you who possess ample solo design experience."

Both of them put up valid objections, but Ves chuckled in amusement. "You want to take over my job? Then show me that you're qualified! I don't care about seniority, connections or other nebulous factors, and neither do our enemies! I will never surrender my post to someone weak! Show me your strength. Prove to our audience here if you are skilled enough to take on this responsibility."

His argument immediately turned the mood against their favor. The four aspirants all looked ill in some manner.

Though a few of them tried to squeeze out an excuse or two why design duels shouldn't be the deciding factor, none of them sounded convincing. The more they whined, the more they damaged their standing.

Chapter 508 Clashing Ambitions

Ves smirked as the aspirants who wanted to take over his position tried to weasel their way out of a design duel.

He had to admit that he worried about the issue before he came up with the idea of a duel. He anticipated some of the reasons that others might bring up, and he couldn't completely retort them all.

The main sticking point lay in the seniority argument. Though the oldest and most experienced mech designer wasn't necessarily the most qualified one for the job, they offered a lot more assurances to everyone compared to an external mech designer that had been drafted into the Mech Corps.

Ves spent hours wracking his head on this issue when he first got the news. He came up with various arguments, lies, schemes and tricks before he metaphorically smacked himself on the head.

"Why am I trying to accommodate a bunch of weaklings? As far as I'm aware of, I'm the best mech designer within a range of several light-years. In terms of knowledge, design experience and skill, nobody can hold a candle to me. They want to pick a fight with me? I'll show everyone what fools they are for challenging me!"

He really needed that kick in the butt. Ever since then, he dropped most of his schemes and simply aimed to steer the gathering into a design duel.

Ves ignored the half-hearted arguments between the most ambitious mech designers and threw his gaze at the high-ranking mech designers that kept themselves out of contention and the low-ranking mech designers who formed the silent majority.

Both these groups appeared to be unconvinced by the counter arguments put forth. A mech duel might inherently benefit Ves, but that did not mean it was a

bad choice. It was the most direct and uncomplicated option available, and relied directly on the personal capabilities of the mech designer to get ahead.

As for votes or other means of deciding the winner? All of them looked weak in comparison. How could anyone think to take over the position of head designer by currying favor among the mech designers?

No matter how good the likes of Mercator and Trozin built up their reputation among the mech designers, their refusal to accept a duel marked them as a coward.

Ves maintained his ever-present smirk as he sat back and let his rivals come to terms with the inevitable. Once he threw out the suggestion of a duel, nobody would be able to retract from the challenge without affecting their reputation.

Personally, he never liked duels. It was a barbaric practice that had initially been revived by mech pilots wanting to prove their mettle.

Mech designers picked up the tradition and tweaked its format to allow for an even playing field for competing designs.

Design duels formed a controversial means of settling an argument, because it could never be completely fair. Nonetheless, it wasn't outwardly unfair either, and the outcome would always be clear and unambiguous.

Once the mech designers in the crowd started to nod off, Ves decided that he let the aspirants prattle around long enough. He clapped his hands, forcing everyone into silence.

"If my esteemed colleagues are finished, let's proceed to the design duel. I've already prepared the venue."

He spoke of his rivals as if they were children, causing their faces to sour even further. Compared to their evident frustration, Ves looked like a beacon

of calm. His confidence oozed out of his body. It was as if he never doubted he would lose at anything.

"Come along now, we don't have all day."

In actual fact, Ves booked eight hours in one of the large-scale training rooms. When he booked the training room, a ship officer immediately got on the line and asked him why he needed so much time.

Training rooms were very valuable because they allowed for extensive simulations with high-quality projectors. The mech squads aboard the Shield of Hispania competed against each other for time in the training room, and here came Ves to snatch their favorite cookie from their grasp.

He answered the ship officer in the simplest terms. "I need this training room to put some unruly children in their place."

Once the Vandal officer heard that Ves intended to hold a design duel, the man smiled in understanding and wished him luck.

The duel was sacred and enjoyed a lot of respect in human society. That was why none of the mech designers retreated from the challenge. Backing out before a fight brought a lot more shame than suffering an outright loss. At least in the latter case, the losers proved their valor to go through with a fight.

Over the next eight hours, a slow-moving tragedy took place. The mech designers looked on from a distance as Ves and four ambitious mech designers took the time to design a mech out of a selection of random parts and mech sections.

From time to time, small groups of off-duty mech pilots and servicemen strolled into the training room. Word of the duel spread throughout the entire ship, and everyone who arrived expected to witness a riveting battle.

All they saw were five mech designers meticulously putting their designs together. To those who lacked a technical background, it was as exciting as watching paint dry. Though some of the ship engineers chose to remain, the disappointed mech pilots always left immediately after.

In the interest of maintaining a veneer of fairness, Ves set a completely random selection of parts at the spot. This way, Ves proved that he hadn't prepared a complete design beforehand.

He wouldn't be able to prepare beforehand because the selection process only picked out a couple of hundred components out of a basket of billions different options. Each new scramble drew out a completely different selection of parts.

All of the parts came from mech and component designs published over two-hundred years ago. Their simple and outdated nature allowed his competitors to work with them more proficiently as they didn't need to spend too much time trying to figure out.

Of course, Ves enjoyed a more lopsided advantage as nobody could match his knowledge and raw Intellect.

He also let the duel take place over a fairly lengthy period of eight hours in order to give everyone plenty of time to go through their design process. While he could have cobbled up a design in two hours or less, his rivals would cry out if he went through with that. Most designers needed at least six hours to come up with a decent duelling mech.

The generous conditions failed to close the gap. Ves designed a simple but exquisite space knight. He thought about designing a hybrid mech instead, but rejected it because a space knight could handle ranged attackers by closing in with its flight system.

Ves limited the design duel to spaceborn mechs because most mech designers possessed more proficiency in this mech classification. That became evident when most mech designers presented mech designs that shamelessly ripped off the Inheritor and Hellcat designs.

"As expected." He smirked.

The design duel happened entirely in a virtual setting. They couldn't afford the resources nor equipment to test their designs in the physical universe.

To avoid complications, Ves also stipulated that the duels proceeded with non-iterative piloting AIs. This meant that they would reset after each duel and negated any learning advantage when the next duels took place.

Though the AIs piloted the simulated mechs like overactive teenagers, the distinct strengths and weaknesses of each design sprung forth.

Each design dueled with every other design, so four duels took place in total.

His design easily beat the Hellcat ripoffs. While he had to admit that the two designers who chose to design a hybrid mech understood the mechanics of the design, it remained a fact that hybrid mechs was exceedingly complex and introduced many inefficiencies in their construction.

The designers completely disregarded the fact that hybrid mechs derived their value from their ability to affect morale. The Hellcat worked great in larger skirmishes and pitched battles, and only against human opponents.

Against an emotionless AI that lacked the capability to feel fear, the Hellcat ripoff's strong burst performance crashed against the indomitable shield of the opposing space knight designed by Ves.

Frankly, Ves was disappointed in the performance of the Hellcat imitations. Mech designers like Trozin who aimed for a promotion should have known better than to resort to hybrid mechs for a duel.

If Trozin became their head designer, Ves predicted that she would eventually screw up in a catastrophic manner. Her blind spots could compete against black holes in how much space they distorted!

"They're so stupid." He whispered softly to Iris as they stood at the side while the projections of the virtual duels proceeded apace. "The Hellcats are meant to rally allies and intimidate enemy mech pilots. Their greatest strengths are entirely negated by the duel format."

Iris shrugged. "They only know to design something familiar to them. They've been exposed to the same three designs for several years, with few opportunities to develop any other designs. The Akkara heavy cannoner isn't suitable for a duel in space, so that effectively leaves only two design templates."

The Inheritor ripoffs put up a better fight. The light skirmishers possessed the speed advantage. Against the medium space knight that Ves designed, his creation could never catch up if the skirmishers insisted on staying out of range.

Yet according to the standard mech dueling conventions, the faster mech needed to take the initiative to attack. An endless chase where the slower mech tried to catch up to the faster mech in vain was more of a farce than a proper duel.

The AIs piloting the dagger-wielding skirmishers wasted a fair amount of fuel before they got it in their heads that they should initiate the attack. They switched from evasion to offense and tried to charge his space knight which took up a basic but solid defensive stance.

None of the skirmishers ever got in more than surface scratches. Knights formed the bane against skirmishers no matter if the battle took place on land

or in space. Their comprehensive armor coverage meant that skirmishers couldn't sneak around the back and get an easy kill.

In fact, Ves anticipated that his space knight faced a light mech, so he deliberately lightened the frontal armor in order to free up the capacity to strengthen the rear armor. This wasn't a good idea under normal circumstances, and even without this tweak his space knight would win, but the victory became a lot more lopsided as a consequence.

Mercator's expression grew uglier and uglier as his pride and joy ineffectually danced around the space knight designed by an external mech designer. The pathetic performance of his Inheritor imitation reflected back on him. Some of his allies even started to back away from him, as if they were afraid that others would associate them in the same group.

"This isn't fair!" He hissed. "A spaceborn skirmisher is naturally restrained by a space knight! My design never stood a chance from the start!"

"What is it with you and fairness?" Ves jabbed back. "I've iterated the format and all of the rules beforehand in a transparent manner. Nobody forced you to design a skirmisher."

"This doesn't count! Trozin is just incompetent for designing such an awful hybrid knight." Mercator incisively stated. "You may have won one round, but I demand another duel with landbound mechs! The design I've worked on most is the Akkara heavy mech! Do you dare to pit yourself against my land-based creations?"

"Hahahaha!" Ves laughed. "There are no do-overs here, no second chances. As I just said, I've stated the duel format before and nobody brought up any objections. Mr. Mercator, I sincerely ask you to temper your ambitions. Right now, the Verle Task Force depends on their spaceborn mechs to escape from

the Kingdom. A mech designer who can't design a decent spaceborn mech is wholly unfit to become their head designer!"

This argument practically formed the death knell of Mercator's ambitions. The majority of the mech designers knew what was at stake and which kind of mechs they needed to depend on to survive.

The day ended in an anti-climactic manner. It went without saying that Ves was the only one who won every duel. No rematch or runoff duel was necessary to prove the crowd who won.

Chapter 509 Accountability

"You went too far, Ves. You demolished them completely. You showed no mercy to Bovis."

"Mr. Mercator had it coming." Ves waved his hand dismissively as they returned to their shared office. "

"It's one thing to put down a rabid dog. It's another thing entirely to torture the poor creature all the while you laughed like a maniac! Did you see your face at the end? You reveled in your bullying, and don't say it's not! You crushed them by abusing your superiority!"

"And that's supposed to be a bad thing, sir? It's not my fault they're so incompetent. For all of his ambition, Mr. Mercator doesn't have the skill to back it up. I'm sure he can give me a run for my money if we competed on designing heavy cannoneers, but the Akkara mechs only take up a small part of the Vandal mech roster."

The design duels exposed the inadequacies of his challengers. This was the privilege afforded by strength. Though he did not measure up to a genuine Journeyman Mech Designer, out of all of the mech designers in the task force, he came closest to meeting this standard.

The entire spectacle revolving around the duel showcased his strength in a way that a boring resume never could. He could talk and boast about his accomplishments all he wanted, but humans but the lesson only hit home when Ves smacked his superiority in their faces.

Unfortunately, Iris brought him back to reality. "They're not resigned to this loss. You can see it in their faces. They think you cheated somehow, or stacked the deck against their favor from the start. I can imagine that Bovis will quickly try to stir up trouble to destabilize your position."

"I know."

"You do, sir?"

"Yeah, that's why I stomped them all so hard. These ambitious mech designers can try to build up support all they want, but their standing among the Vandals and the other mech designers has taken an enormous hit. The perception of their strength is their foundation. Now that I've undermined their basic qualifications, they'll face an uphill battle trying to pull people in their camps."

Iris sighed and shook her head. "That's not sufficient to silence dissent. People are impressed with you, but there's a long road ahead of you if you want to make them loyal to you, boss."

"I'm not thinking that far ahead. The Verle Task Force will only take two months to reach the Reinald Republic. They'll dither around for a few weeks perhaps before they return home. A round trip will actually take a shorter amount of time since we don't have to worry about sneaking through enemy-occupied space. So in total, I expect this arrangement to last four months at most. Once we reunite with the main fleet, my position becomes redundant."

"Regardless of how short you get to enjoy your temporary powers, it will be a valuable boon on your record. As long as you do a decent job, you'll be on the

shortlist whenever Professor Velten needs someone to take charge of something. That's what Bovis and Emlanin are scheming for. They'll do anything to secure this opportunity."

"Then it's good that I've appointed Mr. Mercator and Miss Trozin as my deputies." Ves grinned. "After all, even if they lost their duels, they achieved the best overall results. It's only fair to assign some responsibilities to them, and that's the key. I've curtailed most of their options, since if they try to screw something up, it will inevitably reflect on their performance instead of mine."

Iris hummed on that. "Keep your friends close and keep your enemies closer. That's a double-edged sword, you know. Enemies this close can easily stab you in the back when you least expect it, sir. I'm not saying you've taken the wrong course of action, but your approach leaves you with few friends and even fewer allies."

"That's a fair point." Ves grunted. "At first, I wanted to elevate Pierce as one of my deputies, but he doesn't have the stomach for it. He would do an awful job if I forced the responsibility on his shoulders."

While Ves couldn't call Pierce his friend, he felt he could trust the man somewhat. It was too bad that Pierce wasn't up to the task. He grew up under his father who was a mech designer from the Friday Coalition and enjoyed an enormous advantage in his upbringing that others would kill for. Despite his generous endowments, Pierce turned out to be no better than a mech designer from the Republic.

This basically proved that Pierce lacked the drive, talent and ability to be a good deputy to Ves. Forcefully elevating him to a position beyond his means would invite a lot of criticism about nepotism. It would also undermine the principle of strength that Ves leaned on to secure his leadership role.

Ves rubbed his head. "All this politicking is a pain in the butt. Why can't people accept my appointment with grace? From what I've witnessed, the Vandals never question their superiors."

"It's because mech pilots are simple brutes, sir. They don't have any complicated thoughts. Mech officers gained their position because they're better pilots or better commanders. Their strength in these qualities directly affect the survival of their subordinates. In the perspective of mech pilots, if their mech officer screws screws up, they die."

"In contrast, if the designer screws up, other people die." Ves added succinctly. "My screw-ups won't affect Mercator and Trozin's lives. They'll be rooting for my downfall regardless of the human cost."

"I can see Bovis might be ambitious enough to do that, but Emlanin definitely won't. She's too attached to the Vandals to put their lives at risk. That's not to say that you shouldn't worry about her. I'm acquainted with her enough to know that she's like a viper in the grass. She won't attract any attention while she lies in wait, but she'll deliver a fatal blow when the time is right."

That sounded somewhat worrisome to Ves, but not to the point where he felt ill at ease. Whatever crisis may come his way, he'd deal with it like he dealt with every crisis.

Ves turned his attention back to his work. The recent conference meeting settled the leadership issue. Not only did he introduce some new policies, he also issued a set of preliminary orders. Right now, every mech designer should be facilitating the transition to a new resource management system.

The new software shared the similar capabilities to the old one, but put more emphasis on different priorities. In particular, the new software offered better tracking of the input and output of a production process.

For example, if someone put 100 tons of raw material in a machine and spat out 20 tons of product and 79 tons of waste, there was an obvious discrepancy of 1 ton of materials. Where did missing ton this end up? The new software wouldn't let the operators get away with this without immediate alarm.

Of course, this was an extremely simplified example. In practise, the perpetrators wouldn't be stupid enough to leave such an obvious trail. Nonetheless, the new software had seemingly been geared against untrustworthy subordinates. It left the machine operators with much less leeway to pull something off.

Ves hoped that everyone got the message that he tried to convey with this change. It wasn't a coincidence he opted for this particular software package.

"Now that all of the distractions are out of the way, it's time for me to start my planning."

His main responsibility as a head designer was to plan out the task force's mech composition. This was an exceedingly complex task as Ves needed to take into account the skillsets of each mech company, the resources at his disposal, Major Verle's priorities and the mech composition of their opponents.

The latter element introduced a lot of complexity to the challenge. Its introduction turned the chessboard from a solo game to a competitive game. Ves needed to anticipate the mech models that the different duchies would bring to bear against the task force.

"Iris." Ves turned away from his terminal. "Can you tell me about the territories that the Vandals will likely pass by on their way to the Reinald Republic?"

"You're curious about the duchies, sir?"

"Yes. I a better understanding of their traits and mech doctrine in order to plan against their retaliation."

"Hm, I've been thinking about that as well." Iris said. "While I can't say for sure which territories we'll cross, there is only one practical route if we wish to reach the Reinald Republic within two months. We'll encroach upon the territories of four duchies in total."

She sent him some files that enumerated these duchies.

"First up, there's the Imodris Duchy. They form one of the pillars of the Vesia Kingdom because of their strength and core position. Imodris is also very prosperous because it jointly controls one of the Kingdom's two port systems. This has led them to pursue a balanced mech doctrine. The Duchess of Imodris feels that she doesn't need to focus her budget and research initiatives on only a handful of mech types. Her territory has the resources to pursue everything."

Ves nodded in understanding. Bentheim was the same. The sheer amount of prosperity and the abundance of private industries fostered a very diverse development climate. "That lack of specialization will still have consequences, though. A jack of all trades is strong at nothing."

"True, but you shouldn't underestimate the Imodris Legions regardless. Each complete legion is capable of fulfilling any role on the battlefield."

"I'm fairly familiar with Imodris already, you don't need to explain that. Since we struck their star system, it's likely that they've got a fire lit under their butts. The Duchess of Imodris is a ruthless lady from what I heard, so she'll definitely try to catch up to us."

"While that's true, the Duchess sent her strongest legions to the frontlines. While she's still holding back her crack troops, she needs them to defend her powerbase."

The Vandals needed more time to recuperate. They just completed a massive operation, and while they achieved all of their objectives, they also faced

some unexpected setbacks. The mech pilots needed rest and the mechs needed to be fixed up.

"I really hope she's not crazy enough to send in her elites, then. We're almost out of her hair anyhow." Ves sighed. "What's the next territory in our way?"

"Next up is the Venidse Duchy, which is another Vesian core territory. They're almost as strong as the Imodris Duchy. The two territories are rivals in fact, but the difference is that the Venidse Duchy doesn't have the advantage of a port system."

"How come Venidse can match up to Imodris then?"

Iris smirked. "That's because the Vendise Duchy enjoys a high endowment of natural resources, though not to the point where they can match the benefits of a port system. Nevertheless, Venidse holds their own against Imodris because the duchy adheres to a very disgusting mech doctrine."

"That's an interesting choice of words." Ves chuckled. "Tell me more about this disgusting doctrine."

"Well sir, their rationale is like this. No matter what kind of mechs Imodris throws at them, the Venidse Mech Legions will always be able to come up with a response if they slow their opposition down. Venidse is all about attrition warfare. They will do everything in their power to pull their enemies into a quagmire. Once their opponents fall into their trap, the Venidse mechs will grind them all to pieces."

"Okay, I see now why you call that disgusting. If that's their main mode of combat, then every skirmish against Venidse will always spiral out of control. Their enemies need to think twice before they decide to engage in combat against their forces."

"It's a good thing that their doctrine has a lot of holes. Their mechs are geared towards endurance, so their burst performance is atrocious. They highly lean

on laser weapons because they last longer, but that also means that you can prepare an easy counter against them."

"I suppose it's not as easy as that." Ves commented. "If their strategy is so one-dimensional, they don't have the grounds to compete against Imodris."

"That's right. There's a tricky aspect to Venidse's mech doctrine."

Chapter 510 Mech Doctrines

"The Venidse Mech Legions try their best to pull their enemies into a contest of attrition. They're good at slowing or hindering their opposition so that they won't be able to get away in time. Once they've trapped the enemy mechs, they'll deploy their killer strike."

"Ah, the old classic hammer and anvil tactic." Ves nodded in recognition. "The anvil pins the enemy forces in place while the hammer slams them from the rear."

"I wouldn't it a hammer, sir. It's more of a poisonous dagger. Venidse is very good at forming stealth squads that act like commandos. These stealth mechs are piloted by exquisitely-trained elites who make it their life's work to sabotage critical enemy infrastructure. They have a habit of assassinating enemy leaders if they can get away with it. Their stealth technology is so good that they've become something of a terror."

"I have to admit, that sounds very dreadful." Still, Ves recognized a couple of shortcomings. "Venidse must have poured a lot of resources and training into establishing these stealth squads. They should be their most prized elite. If it isn't necessary, they would not deploy these precious mechs."

Stealth mechs gained the ability to avoid detection by sacrificing their armor. Instead of utilizing conventional armor plating, they replaced them with active stealth plating. This turned them into fragile machines that absorbed less damage than a light mech.

A surprise attack involving an entire squad of stealth mechs needed to be planned and carried out to perfection, because it wasn't cheap to build them up. Any failure reflected badly on the commanding officer.

The question was whether Venidse found it worthwhile to commit their most valuable stealth units to stop the Vandals in their tracks.

"We've got to hope for the best but plan for the worst." Ves summed up.

"While there's no guarantee that Venidse will go as far as to employ their stealth mechs against us, we should bolster our stealth countermeasures regardless."

Even so, countermeasures only worked up to a point. Since Venidse committed to this strategy, they would have gained a lot of proficiency in developing countermeasures against the countermeasures.

"Ugh, that's another headache." Ves rubbed his head. "Is there anything else about Venidse that I should take into account?"

"Not really, boss."

"Okay, so after passing through Imodris and Venidse, what's the next territory in our way?"

"That should probably be the Klein Duchy, sir. Different from the other two duchies, the Klein Duchy is a peripheral territory. It falls outside the core regions of the Kingdom and isn't as prosperous or as developed. It occupies a lot of space, though. We'll have to spend some time traversing their domain."

Ves read up on the Klein Duchy on his terminal. It was larger but sparser, sort of like a backwater region to the Vesian core region. It didn't offer any noteworthy resources or industries.

"The Klein Duchy isn't an economic powerhouse, so they can't be as wasteful as Venidse which happily engages in costly battles of attrition. They've poured

their limited resources into their long-ranged firepower doctrine. Their main mechs are lightly armored but have extreme reach reach. They favor keeping their enemies in sight and at long range. The moment any mechs come closer, they collectively pull back in order to maintain their range advantage."

Ves laughed at that. "What a conservative strategy! Sure enough, the Klein forces will be able to maintain their strength this way, but will lead to a lot of lost ground as well. They can't keep backing off in a defensive situation. They have to stand their ground in some cases."

"Oh, they do maintain some decent defensive units, but they're fairly bog standard so you don't need to employ a specific strategy against them. Klein focuses most of their development in strengthening their long-ranged units, and to be fair they've become quite good at that. They mainly rely on lasers because their beams travel at light speed, but they also throw in plenty of kinetic and explosive firepower into the mix. Their heavy artillery mechs form the crown jewels to every mech legion."

Their long-ranged prowess sounded very worrisome. They couldn't let the Klein mechs pull the Flagrant Vandals into their game. Ves started flitting through ideas. "Light mechs will do the job. They're fast and their high evasion will allow them to close the distance."

"Oh, don't rely on light mechs only, boss. Plenty of enemies have tried to do so, but the House of Klein still manages to hang on to their duchy. I suggest you read up on their past battles to find out how they dealt with light mechs."

Iris reminded Ves that he shouldn't take these generalizations as truth. The territories adopted these mech doctrines as a high-level development strategy. The actual mech forces at their disposal doubtlessly exhibited a greater variety of mech types. In addition, private sector outfits pursued their own strategies that might run counter to that of the military.

It would be a mistake to paint every duchy in a broad stroke.

"Even though the Klein Duchy sounds fairly tricky, they're not as strong as Imodris and Venidse, right?"

"That's correct, sir. The Klein Duchy needs to defend a lot more territory but has fewer mech legions at their disposal. The only downside is that they haven't sent as much mechs to the frontlines as the core regions, so there is probably a high chance we will bump into one of their patrols."

Ves took note of that and more. Plans continued to whirl inside his mind, and the more he learned, the more he fleshed out his own strategies.

"Then if that's all there is to Klein, what's the next territory in the way?"

"The Hafner Duchy borders the Klein Duchy on one end and the Reinald Republic on the other end. It's a border territory, and is as sparse as the Klein Duchy. The only problem is that because it borders the Reinald Republic, the Kingdom subsidizes its mech forces in order to strengthen their border defenses. Hafner is therefore stronger than Klein, though their military can't match up against Imodris or Venidse."

"So what are they good at?" He asked. There was no way their final stop would be so simple.

"Hafner's mech legions are geared towards deterrence and anti-piracy efforts. They follow a two-pronged mech doctrine. First, they employ a lot of light mechs. Skirmishers, saboteurs, light riflemen, you name it, Hafner has it. Their light mechs never gather together in the scale of regiments or legions, but rather operate in smaller batches in order to patrol the border systems and chase after individual pirate ships."

"I see. Since these light mechs are aimed towards pirates, they don't fare well against a frontline mech regiment."

"True, but don't forget the Flagrant Vandals isn't a normal mech regiment either." Iris warned. "Our mech composition is ideal for raiding, which just happens to match the modus operandi of pirates. In Hafner's eyes, the Flagrant Vandals are no different than pirates. We're just better organized, that's all."

Just like how the Vesian mech forces became good at some aspects and bad in other aspects, the Vandals exhibited their own dimensionality. As a raiding regiment, they exhibited a lot of speed, but wouldn't last in a battle against tough opposition.

The Hafner mech legions pursued a familiar mech doctrine to the Vandals.

"Hafner has an enormous hatred against pirates because they suffer a lot from their raids near the border. You can imagine that their light mechs are all fast. Yet anti-piracy is only one of their missions. They need to show off their strength against the foreign states at the border as well, so they've poured in some of their resources in hard-hitting cavalry."

In mech terminology, cavalry meant mechs that hit hard and fast.

"Ah, so they're focused on shock attacks, is that right?"

"Guessed it right, boss." Iris nodded with a smile. "As you can imagine, the Hafner shock troops are predominantly medium mechs that excel in charges. They take some time to build up their momentum, but once they get going, they're almost impossible to stop without suffering more damage in the process. Still, Hafner hasn't managed to circumvent the shortcomings around this strategy."

Medium mechs that specialized in shock attacks didn't necessarily have to be light, but they couldn't carry too much armor either. Most of the time, their frontal armor was very decent, but their flank and rear armor was as thin as light mech armor.

Furthermore, while these mechs exhibited a high level of peak performance, they quickly ran out of steam. They never lasted very long in battles of attrition.

Despite these obvious weaknesses, Ves kept frowning as he mulled over Hafner's mech doctrine. "They don't sound very defensive."

"That's because they believe a good defense is a good offense. Hafner is very aggressive. They attack in order to defend."

Out of all the mech doctrines that Iris listed out, Ves worried about the one developed by the Hafner Duchy the most. The Flagrant Vandals could easily manage to work around the other doctrines, but the strategies employed by Hafner formed a direct counter.

"The final step will be the hardest. Out of all the different territories in our projected route, the Hafner Duchy poses the highest threat to us."

As mech designers, both of them understood what a bad matchup it was. If Hafner brought enough mechs to bear on the Vandals, the task force's very existence was at stake.

More than that, Hafner's extensive focus on chasing pirates turned them into excellent trackers as well. Ves imagined that the Vandals wouldn't be able to hide from Hafner's scrutiny as they tried to cross their territory. Several pitched battles might very well erupt between them before the Vandals finally reached the Reinald Republic.

Ves scratched his chin. His plan needed to be changed now that he became aware of Hafner's strengths. "Every territory is challenging, but it's important to maintain our strength up to the end. We need all of the mechs we can get to get through Hafner's blockade."

He dove into his studies and investigated the territories further. Now that Iris provided an introduction on each of them, Ves had no trouble interpreting the

data. He drew on the central database of the Mech Corps to obtain estimates on the mech disposition of each duchy.

"Damn!" Ves exclaimed. "The Hafner Duchy hasn't shifted any of their mech legions to the front! They're essentially at full strength!"

Iris was already aware about this fact. "It wouldn't make sense for the Hafner mech legions to cross the entire Kingdom to reinforce the front. They have their own responsibilities. The Duke of Hafner won't be able to reassign too many mechs from the border. Otherwise, the Reinald Republic and its neighbors might take advantage somehow."

Perhaps that might be a silver lining to the Flagrant Vandals. Iris was right in that most mechs that belonged to Hafner needed to defend the border. They wouldn't easily be pulled from their posts to pursue the elusive Vandals.

"Okay, so we still have a chance."

As long as they had an opening, Ves would do his best to squeeze the Vandals through the gap. He refined his understanding of the opposition and dove into the disposition of the Vandals. By comparing them with each other, he drew up a variety of ideas.

Not all of them would be workable. The most ideal solutions also happened to be the most expensive ones. Ves was forced to discard most of his fantasies because the Vandals faced a lot of limitations.

"This is harder than I thought."

Ves hadn't even factored in the expert pilots yet. Every expert pilot was unique, and most of the times their mechs didn't conform to conventional strategies. Ves had never seen Venerable O'Callahan in action. The one time when the Vandals wanted him to deploy, he outright refused to exit the ship.

"I'm going to have to talk to his design team." He grumbled.

He wanted to know why they guzzled up so many resources.