

Chapter 511 Titanium Garden

While the Flagrant Vandals split their fleet in two, the ripple effects of the Detemen Operation still reverberated in the Vesia Kingdom and the Bright Republic.

The two third-rate states had been locked in a perpetual cycle of war and peace, and even the peace was a lie. Through centuries of war, they experienced a lot of events. The Vesians always put the Bright Republic on their back foot, and if not for the upswing in desperation among the Brighters to stem the tide, the Republic might not be standing anymore.

The entire Komodo Star Sector already became engulfed in war. Besides certain exception such as the isolationist Ylvain Protectorate that bordered the Republic on the side, most states entered into a conflict of some sort.

The conflict between the Vesians and the Brighters might as well be a scuffle between toddlers compared to the clash of the two giants of the Komodo Star Sector. The multifaceted Friday Coalition threw tens of thousands of ships and millions of mechs against the unitary might of the Hexadric Hegemony.

Whenever the rest of the Komodo Star Sector watched these behemoths wage war, they felt envious and afraid. None of them could withstand the destruction being wrought after a single day of combat.

"The Coalition and the Hegemony are the only states in the Komodo Star Sector worth a damn."

The Glowing Planet Campaign brought their conflict to the fore, and messed up their well-laid plans. The rogue planet's value couldn't be underestimated, and both sides ruthlessly carved out city-sized chunks from the floating rock in space until they stripped its crust, demolished its mantle and crushed its core.

An enormous amount of low-value exotics came into their possession, more than enough to enhance the performance of millions of mechs. More than that, they also obtained a generous stock of high-value exotics, most notably Rorach's Bone with suffused the core of the planet for some reason.

Mech manufacturers and military design teams already started incorporating the wondrous substance into their mechs. Blending trace amounts of Rorach's Bone into their mechs enhanced the durability of alloys and opened them up to resonance.

When mech designers made use of Rorach's Bone as a core material, then the designs they put out achieved a myriad of wondrous effects. The mechs became capable of self-repair over time if fed with energy. The machines also became highly conductive to resonance, though it was generally thought to be wasteful to utilize the material to facilitate fake resonance.

In short, the battle between elites took on a new dimension with the introduction of Rorach's Bone and other exotics. The mechs piloted by expert and ace pilots became tougher. The extra materials also amplified their resonance effects, which led to devastating massacres if these elite mechs ever deployed against standard mechs.

"Normal mech pilots have become ants in the battlefield! This is an era of gods and heroes!"

The Titanium Garden. A massive artificial planet composed out of a massive amount of titanium, which was one of the more valuable mundane materials in the galaxy. A huge expense had been made to fashion such a planet out of nothing, and the worst thing about it was that it served little practical use.

Who was crazy enough to build their own artificial planet when the galaxy possessed trillions of them? Anyone wealthy enough could lay a claim on a lifeless rock that orbited a random star and build them into their own domain.

Only those with sick minds or something to prove bothered with the extravagance of building their own planet.

Many citizens of the Coalition spoke of the former. Master Carmin Olson threw an enormous amount of money in the drain just to satisfy her vanity. That and other extravagant purchases shortly after her elevation to Master Mech Designer branded her with the reputation of a profligate diva.

Olson cared little for the opinions of the masses. Her thoughts and calculations took place on a higher level than normal human beings. In fact, it was doubtful that she could even be considered a member of the human race. Though outwardly she looked like a woman in her prime with a different color of hair each day, inwardly her genes and flesh had underwent a huge transformation.

Despite their enormous progress in this area, mankind still dabbled in the art of modifying their frail bodies. Mech designers mainly focused on enhancing their longevity and intellect, but both of them were still fairly poorly understood. These modifications often introduced strange and incidental side effects, which most often expressed itself as a physical mutation or a mental disorder.

Nobody to call Master Olson insane, though the thought sometimes flitted in their minds. In any case, she comported herself as a human when she met with others, and that was sufficient to allay people's worst fears.

Much of the upper portion of the Titanium Garden consisted of spatially confusing latticeworks.

Beams of titanium crossed or meshed into each other in an intricate geometric pattern that hinted at a profound mathematical truth of the multiverse.

These beams supported a small number of great islands covered by all manner of greenery. In one of the larger islands, a highly secure vault

surrounded by many layers of titanium and compressed alloys, Master Olson led her youngest disciple inside.

"Carminnnn, I'm bored! Why I can't I go off to the frontlines or visit my good friend Ves?"

A fair feminine hand gently smacked the adolescent man in the face. "Address my properly, Oleg."

"Oowww! Sorry Master!"

Master Olson tediously went through the process of unlocking the mech-sized vault doors. "You have just advanced into the ranks of Journeyman Mech Designer. This marks your transformation from a learner of the arts into a full-fledged creator of wonders. From the perspective of the mech industry, you've grown from a teenager and reached adulthood."

"Does that mean you're a granny?"

"Ooww!"

Olson gave her direct disciple another slap, though her motions possessed a touch of playful indulgence.

"Progressing up the ranks isn't an advancement of age. It is a transformation of the mind. Do you think you are the same young boy as before? Your knowledge and skills surpass almost everyone in the Komodo Star Sector, and that disparity will only grow in the future. You must become more aware of your place in the galaxy."

"And what is my place? Competing at the Rimward Games? Oh please, I'll breeze through that show in a jiffy."

"There are more freaks and talents than you, Oleg. Do not think you are unique among every mech designer in the galactic rim. Even within the

Coalition, you still need to defeat your rivals in order to obtain the nomination to represent our state."

"Don't remind me." Oleg grumbled. A human with an abnormal level of intelligence like his was rare, but not unique.

Many more mutations and deviations from the norm existed as well. Most abnormal humans suffered from detrimental mutations due to exposure to dangerous exotic substances or exceedingly rare stellar radiation. Only a tiny portion lucked out and benefited from a beneficial mutation.

No one could explain Oleg's anomalous level of cognition. His parents were normal citizens of the Coalition, and they lived on a quiet planet under the Vermeer Group for decades.

The most plausible idea any researcher came up with was that Oleg's mother became exposed to a bizarre ray of energy that transformed the fetus inside her womb a short time after conception. It was as good of an explanation as any, because no one succeeded in replicating the phenomenon.

The pair remained quiet until Master Olson finished unlocking the vault doors. The huge mechanisms behind the doors moved the enormous obstacles around until the way forward became unbarred.

"Let us enter."

The two strode forward with measured steps. The metallic compressed armor that formed the floor of this vault clanked with sharp noises as the two mech designers entered the dark and hollow vault chamber.

They passed through another set of gates before they entered the inner vault, which held the only prize in this enormous structure.

Arrayed before them stood a transparent case made out of extremely durable composites. Oleg didn't recognize their exact formula, but he recognized the

expensive of this glass-like material. It could even give compressed armor a run for their money!

Yet what the mech-sized construction encased blew away his mind. Oleg guessed plenty of possibilities of what lay inside the vault that Master Olson wanted him to see. He guessed that it might be some sort of historic mech, or maybe an exclusive new machine made entirely out of Rorach's Bone.

Never would he have expected to witness a giant, mech-sized skeleton. The sheer size of it sent existential tremors through Oleg's mind. His mentality received a substantial amount of strengthening upon elevation to Journeyman, but in the face of this once-living humanoid giant, all of his confidence bled away like nothing.

"W-W-What is this, Master?!"

"It is a skeleton. The Coalition fleets retrieved it from the crumbling remains of the Glowing Planet. It was buried deep within the core, and was almost discarded as waste as it was buried beneath trash materials."

"It's remarkably intact. If not for the hole at the top of its skull, it would have been an excellent display at a galactic museum." Oleg commented as his fascination never ceased. The skeleton of this massive being possessed some sort of compulsive charm that spoke of absolute dominance. "Do you know anything about its race?"

Master Olson stayed impassive as she stared at the giant. Unlike Oleg, Olson viewed the giant as her equal rather than a superior biological being.

"There are secrets surrounding this race, and much of them are out of my reach. The MTA has expressed an enormous interest in the remains. The Coalition has come to an agreement to let every Master Mech Designer study the remains for month before selling it to the Association."

Oleg looked really impressed now. "It's that valuable?"

"It may even be the only prize we've obtained that is worth mentioning from the Glowing Planet. Rorach's Bone may be rare in the galactic rim, but it is still a commodity in the end."

A few seconds passed in silence before Oleg spoke up again.

"This thing looks like an upscaled human skeleton. Are we.. related somehow?"

"We don't know. Perhaps the MTA might know more, but have decided to withhold the answer for some reason. Yet... my intuition says that it is not a coincidence. I've spoken about it often with my colleagues and the possibility that frighten them the most is that it is the forefather to all humanoid life in the galaxy!"

"That's huge!" Oleg exclaimed. He couldn't fathom the connection between this race of giants and modern humanity, but if a link between the two existed, then everyone's conception of what it meant to be human needed to be dumped in the trash! "Err but wait, what are you doing with this skeleton then? Shouldn't it be studied by exobiologists or something?"

"We've already set some exobiologists loose, but their results are inconclusive. The mysterious surrounding this skeleton is far beyond the means of the Coalition. Let the MTA puzzle about its origins. The true value of this skeleton is that it is a remnant of a being the size of a mech. Do you understand the importance of that to us?"

They were mech designers, not exobiologists. They poured over mech designs for a living, so Oleg didn't need to think very hard to come up with a guess. "You mean, we can study this skeleton to improve our ability to design mechs?"

"There is more to it than that, but that is essentially correct." Master Olson nodded. "There are layers of mysteries behind this skeleton. For the time

being, you and your fellow disciples will remain here to peel back as many layers as you can. What you can learn from this ancient remains will depend on your luck and your thinking. No matter what you get out of this inspection, your mechs will never be the same."

Oleg nodded in a rare moment of solemnity. "I understand. I will do my best to understand this giant!"

He immediately dove into his own mental world as his eyes raked over the ancient bones. He may not know what intricacies they held, but hopefully he would obtain some clues that would help him clinch the upcoming nomination for the Rimward Games.

Chapter 512 Too Much Success

Elsewhere, the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom long threw the fate of the Glowing Planet to the back of their minds. After all, once the two dominant second-rate states of the Komodo Star Sector laid claim to it, they lost rights to contend for ownership of the rogue planet.

The conversation of the day instead revolved around the daring raid of the Flagrant Vandals. This obscure mech regiment under the 3rd Tarry Division never registered in the minds of the Brighters. The Vesians were better acquainted with the Vandals, but often mistook them as wayward mercenaries gone pirate.

Their time of obscurity was a thing of the past. The bombastic events at the Detemen System opened everyone's eyes to what this vagabond-like mech regiment was capable of. The

Vandals sneaked into the core regions of the Kingdom and wreaked havoc at the unsuspecting star system, smashing the garrison fleet in the process! Then they split up. The Vandals under the command of Major Verle overran a moon base, plunged a capital city into chaos, robbed half of its heavy

industries of their assets and captured the planetary leader in a spectacular hunt!

Blood boiled in the citizens of the Republic!

"Hahaha! Look at how clueless they are when faced with an invasion! A planet of the republic would never fall into confusion like that when the Vesians intrude upon our star systems!"

"This is the true face of the Kingdom! For all their boasts, they live under a tyranny! How else is the rebellion so strong!"

"Who are the 6th Flagrant Vandals? I've memorized every mech regiment under the 3rd Tarry Division, but I always thought they were understrength!"

"They look like pirates with funding! Did we hire some washed-up frontier scum and organized them into a regiment or something? They're way too good in raiding the entire place!"

"Did they really capture the heir of a count? The Vesians must be going mad right now!"

Each piece of news buoyed up the Republic's flagging spirits. It provided them with a timely victory to stall the decline in confidence over the war.

While the accomplishments at Detemen IV attracted the most attention, the Vandals also inflicted a lot of damage at Detemen II. The resource-processing planet used to watch over a score of solar foundries. They utilized the incredible heat and energies from the binary stars to transform raw ores and metals into processed alloys.

All of them had been wrecked, which set back House Jier enormously. As the Vandals made landfall on the scorching hot planet, Count Reizen proved himself to be the better of Lord Javier in every way by taking personal command over the defense of their valuable renewable exotics mine.

There was little of value to be found on the surface of Detemen II, but the renewable exotics mine stood out as a massive outlier. Sources of endless exotics were rare, as most of them formed in extreme and highly peculiar situations at the center of the galaxy. The galactic rim only uncovered exotics from ancient stellar objects flung from the center to the outer portions of the galaxy many eons ago.

While stars and planets still ejected from the fulcrum of the center of the galaxy on a regular basis, they always got lost in the vastness of the galactic rim.

The renewable exotics mine was a unique byproduct of a set of coincidences in the galactic center. It was very rare, and formed the basis of House Jier's long-term prosperity. Every force aligned to the House pulled back from defending unimportant facilities in order to safeguard the mine.

They failed. Over two days of hard fighting where Colonel Lowenfield ordered the launch of several waves of artificial asteroids, the defenses around the mine finally crumbled in the face of Vandal determination. Count Reizen's custom mech fled through a tunnel in a bedraggled state, leaving the mine exposed to the Vandals.

Nobody knew what happened to it. Some people guessed that the mine hid some sort of natural treasure that was responsible for making the mine renewable. In any case, the mine lost its essential quality, and no longer generated new junk exotics. Once House Jier mined all of the existing deposits, the mine became exhausted.

These accomplishments fully smacked the face of the Vesians, who had grown arrogant at their continued successes at the frontlines. Their indomitable fleets and mechs slowly pushed forward since the outbreak of the war, but the sudden raid on the Detemen System poured cold water over their shoulders. The shock was too great that some of the Vesians pulled back their

aggression. This unintentionally gave the Mech Corps a rare and precious moment of reprieve.

This highlighted the power of the dissemination of information. In an age where every planet was connected to a vast galactic network, every citizen and serviceman became easily swayed by the news, rumors and propaganda circulating in the void.

Joshua finished reading the news bulletins in his comm and felt his blood boil. Right now, he attended a military-funded mech academy that rushed their mech cadets through years of training.

Many promising cadets couldn't handle the pressure. They washed out after a couple of weeks of high-intensity training and got kicked back to their home star systems.

Though Joshua turned out to be of average ability and talent, his willpower and grit impressed the instructors. Through hard work and focused training, he kept up with the grueling pace and accepted every abuse the instructors flung in his way.

He would not be deterred. It was a dream for a native from Cloudy Curtain to attend a mech academy in Bentheim, and he resolved to never squander it. For it is in this ruthless pace of training that Joshua improved the fastest.

"Damn it." He cursed as he browsed at his rankings in Iron Spirit. "I'm still too far away from unlocking 5-star mechs."

Nobody in his class understood his drive. Joshua felt a little ashamed in telling his fellow cadets why he trained so hard. The main reason why his willpower pushed him through was because he wanted to unlock the ability to pilot the LMC's best virtual mechs!

Sadly, it appeared that it would take at least another year for him to improve enough to escape the bottom of the Gold League. Joshua regularly competed

against mech pilots at least three years older than him. Only until he could overcome this barrier would he be able to enter the Gold League properly, thereby qualifying him to pilot Iron Spirit's 5-star mechs.

"The Marc Antony Mark II, the Blackbeak, the Crystal Lord... why are you still so far away?"

The latter two products gained an enormous amount of fame in the mech industry. Joshua wasn't too exposed to that, but even he heard plenty of stories about their excellence. Even the hardcore virtual athletes started to take note of the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord. Out of all of the virtual designs published by Chasing Clouds, it was these two that formed the crown.

While Joshua dreamed of piloting the the LMC's wonder mechs, elsewhere on Bentheim two women met each other at a quiet rooftop cafe. Among the elegant plants and wood-fashioned furniture, the women stared at each other with varying levels of tension.

"Melinda."

"Raella."

The two Larkinsons happened to grow up together as their ages closely matched. Nonetheless, their current occupations couldn't be more different.

"How's the Guard?"

"It's been hectic, and it doesn't help that I've been promoted to lieutenant." Melinda replied as a couple of service bots floated into their midst and delivered some refreshments. "Thank heavens for the Flagrant Vandals. They've lifted everyone's moods so there's fewer troublemakers out there trying to make a fuss with their mechs."

Raella grinned as she sipped on a multicolored smoothie. "Heh, the Vandals really sound like my kind of people. If I knew they existed, I would have signed

up to them instead! Not that I'm unhappy with my current lot. I've finally been able to pursue the duelling career that I've always dreamed about."

Melinda pressed her lips. "Yes. A mech duelist. What a wonderful career. Yet I don't see your matches on the galactic net."

"That would spoil the whole show! The underground duelling circuit isn't about reaching the highest amount of viewers. It's about experiencing the exhilarating clash of multi-ton machines close-up and personal, where lives are at stake! There's no substitute for that kind of rush!"

"It's too dangerous! It only takes one accident to claim your life! No one can win every duel. The Larkinsons back home are worried sick about you! Even if you renounced the Family, there's still a place for you to return!"

"Hey, it's not like everyone kills each other all the time in the underground duelling circuit." Raella waved away her cousin's concern. "We only go through with it when the crowd is wild or someone pays me to do it. I don't like to admit it, but my last name is a powerful talisman among the gangs. Nobody wants to piss off a Larkinson. They're all afraid Uncle Ark will run out of Citadel Havensworth and crush their entire gang, haha!"

"That's not funny. There are many insane duellists out there who don't care a whit about the Larkinsons."

"Then you better avenge me, Guard Lieutenant Larkinson." Raella spoke with mirth.

Melinda sighed and stirred the spoon in her coffee cup. "Would you believe me if I told you that the Larkinsons are willing to subsidize your entry in a professional duelling team? You won't be able to enter the Rittersberg or Bentheim circuits, but there are many teams elsewhere in the Republic that is looking for talent. Why don't you think about it?"

"Nada. Absolutely not, Melly. I enjoyed my time in the amateur circuit, but I've already seen what a rotten place the pro games are. Sponsorships, merchandising, celebrity outreach, the entire circus around mech duels takes away from the actual fight. I've never felt more like a mech athlete until I began to take part in the underground duels. The gangs don't bother so much with all of that commercial crap. They only care about entertaining rumbles!"

No matter how many times Melinda pleaded her cousin, Raella never relented from her stance. Her frequent duels finally injected a sense of confidence and self-worth in her bearing. She didn't flinch at all in front of a lieutenant from the Planetary Guard.

"I'm my own person now! Even if the Vesians push through the frontlines come and try to take this life away from me, I'll be joining the rest of the Blood Claws in thrashing them out of Bentheim! You can at least be assured of that!"

Both Larkinsons pursued different careers with success. They would never be able to see eye-to-eye with each other. If not for their shared family heritage, they would have never come together in the first place. Yet the bonds of family proved stronger than the animosity engendered by their professions.

More Larkinsons dealt with their own issues in life. Benjamin Larkinson, former expert pilot and one of the foremost heads of the Family, received a call from a surprising source.

"Miss Calsie, how are you today?"

"Not doing well, to be honest." She replied over the comm. Right now, she was calling from her office at the LMC in Cloudy Curtain to Benjamin who relaxed at the Larkinson Compound in Rittersberg. "I need your help with something."

"What is it?"

"The Ministry of Economic Development has been knocking at my doors to demand a stake in the LMC! It turns out we've become a bit too successful and eye-catching in their eyes, so now they want a piece of the pie!"

Benjamin instantly turned serious at that news. "As expected."

"You expected this?!"

"The Republic's mech industry is too important to be allowed free reign. If you look closer at the ownership structure of other major mech manufacturer, the Ministry of Economic Development is a significant shareholder in all of those companies."

The news came at an enormous shock to Calsie, who never heard about this arrangement before. "Why didn't Ves tell me about this?"

"Because it's only relevant to mech companies that have reached a certain scale or developed something of strategic importance. The LMC should have been a few years away from growing large enough to attract attention, but perhaps some people have stirred things up in the background."

"According to the latest toady from the Ministry, since the Crystal Lord was the runner-up to the Best Mech Design of the Year award, we should be privileged to receive their care."

Her tone betrayed her cynicism at the Ministry's offer. This was a typical case of suffering from too much success.

Chapter 513 Big Leagues

"I think you are mistaken about something, Calsie." Benjamin gently lectured. The old Larkinson wanted to be kind, but sometimes people needed to learn a harsh lesson. "For all the Bright Republic's claims about upholding the standard of freedom, the government isn't about to let an uncontrolled element have their way within their borders. The economy is always within their grip."

This really came as a surprise to Calsie. Previously, she was just a law graduate who turned into a temporary caretaker of a multibillion credit company. Though the responsibility initially overwhelmed her, she grew in the position with the help of capable friends within the LMC.

Now though, she found out that her vision was much too narrow. Like a frog within a well, she never became exposed to the truth about the Republic up until she hopped out of hole.

"What are my options?"

"As Ves' agent, you'll have to bend the knee in the face of authority. If the Ministry of Economic Development has their eyes on a stake in the LMC, then it's best to accept the fact that Ves and you won't enjoy an absolute majority anymore. How many shares are they demanding from Ves?"

"They're asking for twenty-one percent, though it will be a different proportion if I choose to issue new stock."

"That's their way of saying that no matter what kind of financial wizardry you pull off, they want to achieve an outcome where Ves no longer run his company like a tyrant."

"So they want to diminish Ves' ownership in his own company until it dips into 49 percent?"

"That's correct. You can decide to sell his shares or issue new stock. The former will swell his bank account while the latter will infuse new funds into the company. I don't advise you to do the latter, and that's not just because our Larkinson Estate will stand to lose. The Ministry of Economic Development often likes to meddle in how mech manufacturers are run, and they'll demand you spend the influx of money into their pet projects."

This was valuable advice from an insider who walked the halls of power in Rittersberg. Calsie frowned at the old man's words. She recognized their

import, but Ves had insisted in the strongest terms to never sell away his shares.

"Ves will not be happy."

"Ves is not here. He appointed you as his agent for a reason. Even if it breaks one of his commands, you do not want to stand against the Bright Republic's industrial policy. This is the way that almost every state works. The government doesn't care about the small fries, but the moment a company grows to the point of being able to affect their prosperity, they will definitely take action. This is the reality of running a large corporation."

Calsie knew that this was no joke. Whenever the Bright Republic, they almost always knew what they were doing. They wouldn't back off from this demand now that they issued it. The only thing she could do was to mitigate the damage.

"So how do I have to treat the negotiation between the LMC and the Ministry?"

"Fill in the Financial Department and the Legal Department and let them handle the details. Some of our retainers will know what to do. Whatever you do, don't let the MoED run over you with their demands. Everything is negotiable, and their negotiators won't push too hard if you demonstrate some spine."

"Why is that so?" Calsie frowned. "From what I've witnessed so far, they're never satisfied with what's on offer!"

"That's because the Ministry is wary about chasing Ves from the Republic if they push him to the brink. It's counterproductive for them to chase away a promising mech designer within their midst."

"Can we negotiate an alternative to giving up his majority stake?"

"That's not possible. You should thank yourself that we live in the Republic. Many other states demand a much higher proportion of outstanding shares."

"So even if Ves decides to move the company's assets and settle in another state, he'll face the same thing over again, is that right?"

"It's worse in that case, because a foreign entrant will always attract more scrutiny. It's best for Ves to start anew in that case and found a new company from the ground up."

All of this largely neutralized the threat of moving their industries elsewhere. Calsie vaguely recognized a common understanding between the states. They kept their grasp on their domestic industries so long as everyone else played along.

"So how will the company be run from now on?"

"Well, the board of directors will have some actual teeth. The MoED will appoint some of their people to the board who will aim to steer the LMC in a way that benefits the Republic as a whole. This won't always be good for Ves or the company, but they aren't out to ruin your business either, so you don't have to worry about that part."

"And if Ves or I disagree with their representatives?"

"Then it comes down to a vote. The main reason why the MoED wants to strip Ves' majority is because they believe it is detrimental for a large company to be controlled by a single person. Even if Ves is the founder and lead designer, there are many companies that have ruined themselves in a single day due to missteps from the majority shareholder. The Republic doesn't want its economy to turn into a commercialised version of the Vesia Kingdom. Power must be shared, and no one should have the ultimate say."

"Splitting up power comes with their own downsides. Ves has told me all about that when he prepared me for this job."

"And all of that is true, but in general the risks are minimized if the LMC transitions away from being under the reigns of someone who holds an absolute majority. With a controlling stake of 49 percent, you will need to think twice on every proposal you put forward, because you need to convince at least one of the other shareholders to go ahead with your ideas."

"That also means that the Larkinson Estate can collaborate with Mrs. Bollinger and the Ministry to vote through your own plans." Calsie incisively pointed out.

"That's a distinct possibility. This is how actual corporations are run, you know. Even if the LMC went public, the MoED would still find a way to obtain at least ten percent of the shares."

"This is really unfair to Ves."

Benjamin smiled and shook his head. "Welcome to the big leagues."

As Calsie grappled with the fact that the LMC prematurely came to the MoED's attention, Ves himself was oblivious to the possibility. He never studied the Republic's laws to a great extent, and the lessons he learned when he attended school neglected to mention any of the sort.

It couldn't be helped, since most graduates from the Rittersberg University of Technology never amounted to anything. Ves was in fact one of their most prominent alumni in the last decade.

If Ves attended the much more prestigious Ansel University of Mech Design on Bentheim, then he would have received some forewarnings about the Bright Republic's economic and industrial policies.

Mech manufacturers played an extremely important role to a state. The fact that they mass produced machines of war only made the matter more important. No state wanted to have a rogue mech manufacturer within their borders selling dangerous mechs to pirates and every other type of scum.

It was no wonder states wanted to bring them to heel in some fashion.

Ves strode exited the shuttle and arrived at a special combat carrier called the Gorgon's Gaze. As far as combat carriers went, she was as old as any other carrier owned by the Vandals. She possessed a balanced mix of attributes, though her designers put a light emphasis on speed over armor.

The Gorgon's Gaze would have been an unremarkable combat carrier were it not for the fact that she hosted the task force's only expert pilot.

Ves read up a bit on Rixt O'Callahan during the shuttle ride. The man was around a hundred years, but failed to prove himself worthy to anyone who would pay for any age-prolonging treatment.

While mech designers had easier access to these exclusive treatments, mech pilots needed to work much harder to obtain the same privilege. Their brains simply worked differently from normal humans and posed additional challenges to those who provided such treatments.

As Ves read through the expert pilot's record, he found out the reason why nobody picked him up. At his prime, O'Callahan managed to resonate up to a strength of forty-four laveres. If he was able to maintain this level of resonance or continued to grow, then he might have been eligible to extend his biological lifespan.

Unfortunately, he only maintained his peak for a short amount of time. His mental faculties and his piloting ability started to slide. This was a cardinal sin among expert mech pilots because it signified that they exhausted their potential.

After bouncing around the Komodo Star Sector trying to convince others to invest in him, he finally returned to the Republic and accepted an invitation from the Vandals.

"This guy is pretty much a washed-up geezer among expert pilots."

That said, Venerable O'Callahan still possessed a formidable amount of strength, measuring up to thirty laves on average. This meant his resonance was stronger than rookie expert pilots.

"The strength of resonance is only one factor in an expert pilot's toolbox."

Other factors also played a role, from the quality of their mechs to the reflexes of the expert. A crude description of resonance was that it was responsible for giving an expert mech their superpowers. Even without this awesome power, an expert mech was still a dreadful machine to behold. The disparity only became a bit narrower if resonance was left out of the equation.

Though Ves had heard about Venerable O'Callahan's irascible temper, he couldn't ignore the massive drain on resources his presence demanded. For better or worse, Ves needed to talk to the expert pilot or someone from his entourage.

Some expert pilots cultivated their own team of mech technicians and mech designers, but O'Callahan lacked this luxury. Instead, the Vandals assigned their own people to serve the expert pilot.

Ves had scheduled a meeting with the head of his design team. Before he spoke with her, he first wanted to get a glimpse on the mech itself. He followed the route projected by his comm and entered into one of the hangar bays of the Gorgon's Gaze. It was smaller than the other hangars, and was obviously arranged to service a single elite mech.

The thing that struck him the most was the mech itself. Ves finally got a glimpse of O'Callahan's famed lancer mech, the Parallax Star. Venerable O'Callahan's mech was basically a cavalry mech on steroids. It amplified the speed and impact damage of the mech. It could build up an incredible amount of speed and was able to pierce through heavy armor with ease with its foldable lance.

If the Parallax Star ever got caught up in a close-ranged duel, then it could retract the length of its lance or abandon it in favor of the backup spear attached to its back.

The mech possessed no ranged weapons of any kind, but this was less of a priority in spaceborn combat. That said, when Ves read up on the customized expert mech, he learnt that the Parallax Star could be converted into a capable aerial mech with some extensive modifications. This allowed the mech to remain relevant when it operated alongside landbound mechs.

As impressive as the Parallax Star sounded, Ves somehow felt that reality fell short. The magnificent burgundy-and-black expert mech looked worn and disjointed. To a layman, its outward appearance seemed fine, but to a skilled mech designer like Ves, the mech appeared to scream in pain.

"There's something wrong here. This mech isn't in a healthy state!"

When Ves extended his meager Spirituality at the mech, he encountered a morass of confusing portions. The mech's intangible spirit wasn't a morass of blended chaos like other mechs that had been worked on by many people. It contained portions of strong focus, but it was cut up in macabre pieces somehow.

Thus, both technically and spiritually, the Parallax Star exhibited a lot of flaws.

"What has its design team been doing?!"

Chapter 514 Parallax Star

A woman in her late thirties and a significantly older man wearing the coveralls of a chief technician arrived next to Ves, who still stared at the Parallax Star in fascinated horror.

The woman who wore the standard green uniform of a mech designer smiled and stepped forward. "Head Designer Larkinson, welcome aboard the Gorgon's Gaze, home to Venerable O'Callahan and his Parallax Star. My

name is Lisbeth Eta-Denmersken, and I'm the leader of the design team. This old man here is Chief Leo Keys."

Ves snapped out of his attempt to make sense of the mechanical butchery at the end of the hangar bay. "Chief Keys. Miss Eta-Denmersken. I'm.. glad to meet you."

"You can call us by our first names."

"Alright then. I've seen enough. Lead me to a compartment where we can discuss things in private."

As the pair guided Ves towards an unoccupied compartment meant for briefings, he considered how to approach their discussion. He already held some misgivings about the Parallax Star's budget, and what he had just laid eyes on only furthered the sense of wrongness about the entire arrangement.

Once they seated themselves in the briefing room, Ves decided to ask the questions that needed to be asked. One way or another, Ves needed to determine if O'Callahan was squandering the precious resources given to him by the Vandals.

"Let me begin by saying as the new head designer, I expect you two to help me tide us all over until we complete our mission and return to Republic space. We're deep into enemy space and cut off from easy access to supplies. We need to get used to leaner times for the next couple of months."

Lisbeth kept smiling at Ves as if she understood his pains. "We are understanding of the difficulties facing the fleet. However, Venerable O'Callahan will pull us through no matter how many Vesians stand in our way. You have nothing to worry about under his care."

This was not the direction that Ves was going for. "Miss Lisbeth, it is admirable for you to place so much faith in our resident expert pilot, but he is but one man among many. The main combatants will always be the regular

mech pilots in our midst. The Venerable needs to save his strength and deploy only when necessary."

"That is exactly our thoughts." Lisbeth nodded, all the while she maintained that strange and incessant smile. "The Parallax Star is always ready to deploy. While it takes some time to rouse our Venerable into readiness, you can be assured that the mech under our care will always be in tip-top shape."

Ves awkwardly coughed. "I believe we should speak about the state of the Parallax Star, but first I'd like to address its budget."

"Oh?" Lisbeth smiled wider. "Have my requests for additional funding finally been accepted?"

"Sadly not. In fact, I am thinking about dialing your generous resource allowances."

Both Lisbeth and Chief Leo blinked at that. It was as if they never thought to hear something like that. The female mech designer's eyes appeared completely befuddled, though she maintained her smile.

"Mr. Larkinson, that's impossible!" Chief Leo uttered.

"Head Designer, you are new in your position." Lisbeth said in a gentle tone.

"You might not have been briefed with the full scope of our activities yet, so let me explain to you what we do here."

She stood up and beckoned Chief Leo and Ves to follow her. They walked out of the briefing room and headed over to the Parallax Star. Once they reached the bottom of its feet, she put her hand over its surface.

"Look at this mech." She began. "Feel its heartbeat. Can you not tell how much care we put in its construction and maintenance? We polish it every day by hand to the point where it has become one of our rituals. The Parallax Star

is designed by Professor Velten herself, and we are the executors of her will. This mech showcases the full potential of a Senior Mech Designer at work."

"That's not all we put our work in." Chief Leo interjected. He walked away from the Parallax Star and headed over a partitioned section in the hangar bay. Come and see what we've prepared.

When Ves looked inside the partition, he became shocked at what he saw. "Are these.. spare parts?"

"Indeed!" Lisbeth clapped. "So far, we've prepared six lances, four short spears, three pairs of legs, seven pairs of arms, five flight systems and three heads. These only concern the outer parts. We have another space that's devoted to storing internal parts such as engines or power reactors. All of these parts are of a different configuration, but all of them are compatible with the Parallax Star."

"It's a semi-modular system that Venerable O'Callahan insisted that we implement." Chief Leo explained. "He wants to have the right tools available at the right time. For example, if O'Callahan needs to fight against an expert ranged mech, he'll order us to configure the Parallax Star with parts that emphasize speed. If he needs to duel against a space knight, then the Parallax Star needs to focus less on speed and more on power and armor."

"How fast can you transition in a different configuration?" Ves asked.

"A simple switch will only take an hour or two at most. A more complex exchange of parts will take up to two days. We're very proficient in this switch because we've trained on it endlessly."

"That's too slow."

"Pardon?"

Both Chief Leo and Lisbeth couldn't process his comment.

"I said, it's too slow." Ves repeated bluntly. "The exact type of expert mech our enemies will deploy is often unknown until their combat carriers are close enough to launch their mechs to fight. Do you really think you have hours or days of preparation time to make your leisurely switch? Impossible! This exercise is horribly redundant and wasteful in terms of resources."

Chief Leo stopped smiling, but Lisbeth didn't appear to be affected. She smiled at him in a different light, however. Before, she looked cordial and friendly. Now, her smiling expression took on a nefarious shade.

"Mr. Larkinson, as we said, you are new to your position. I am sure that if you study our methodology, it will begin to make sense. In any case, I will not allow you to make unilateral decisions without Venerable O'Callahan's approval. In no way will he accept a cut in our budget."

His worst fears came true. Lisbeth Eta-Denmersken joined the cult of O'Callahan and became their head priestess. Ves turned to Chief Leo, but the old man silently shook his head and stood in a deferential manner behind Lisbeth. He had turned into a cultist as well it appeared.

"I don't understand the need for more resources." Ves said, trying to approach this issue from another tack. "You've already fabricated loads of spare parts. It's more than enough to handle any situation. Why do you insist on maintaining the same level of resource allocation?"

"Because it's never enough." Lisbeth answered without any doubt. "Venerable O'Callahan wishes to expand his flexibility to the utmost. We must be ready to address any possible crisis. The more parts we prepare, the better we will be able to address a crisis in the future. It is like adding more tools in the toolbox. We may not need to make use of every tool, but the option is there when we need one of the rarer tools."

Ves shook his head. "That's not how I see it. As far as I'm concerned, the Parallax Star only needs two or three tools to perform most of its jobs. Right now, you are reproducing multiple copies of nearly identical tools that solve the same problems! The toolbox is practically bursting apart!"

"We disagree. No matter what analogy you use, the only thing that matters is this is the will of Venerable O'Callahan."

"Okay then. Let me speak to him. Maybe I have better luck convincing the pilot."

"We refuse." Lisbeth responded with an irritated smile. "Venerable O'Callahan is far in his age and needs his precious rest. The longer he sleeps, the more his aging process slows down. Every minute awake is eating at his limited lifespan. I cannot in good faith allow you to rouse him from his slumber to make a request that we know for certain he will refuse. A budget cut is not in contention."

"What if I force this change over your protest?"

"Then the Verle Task Force will lose its only expert pilot."

"Maybe we're better off that way. As far as I know, O'Callahan only deployed into combat a couple of times over the past five years. That's an abysmally low deployment rate even for an expert pilot that needs to stay in reserve. There were several battles where our resident expert pilot's intervention would have saved the Vandals a lot of pain."

The woman calmly retorted while maintaining her smile. "Expert pilots aren't meant to hold our hands. They are the ultimate weapons to be used in the most dire threats to the Vandals. Intensive combat only accelerates his aging. His personal doctor has warned us that highly stressful moments may even accelerate the degeneration of his cognition and motor functions. Unless it is

absolutely necessary, we will not allow Venerable O'Callahan to squander his life."

While the explanation made Ves more sympathetic to the expert pilot, he had grown under the auspices of several other expert pilots. He long outgrew the instinctual need to worship a strong pilot.

"Besides," Chief Leo spoke up. "The Venerable has long come to an arrangement with Professor Velten. She agreed to the existing terms in order to retain our expert pilot. This is not a deal you meddle with on your own."

Ves was afraid of that. O'Callahan obviously extorted an enormous amount of privileges from the Vandals, all the while he spent the majority of his time in sleep. The Venerable shamelessly squandered billions worth of high-quality exotics into fabricating endless spare parts, most of which would likely never even see any use!

Now he knew why the Parallax Star appeared to scream in pain. The mech was made out of disjointed parts, and had switched into a multitude of different configurations over and over again. Any mech would go mad with such senseless treatment.

Ves lamented the craftsmanship and expensive materials that went into their fabrication. Professor Velten demonstrated the prowess of a Senior Mech Designer in the Parallax Star's design. It was too bad that most of it had gone to waste.

After half an hour of touring and fruitless pleading, Ves departed from the Gorgon's Gaze with a drained expression.

"Crazy bint! And that old chief, why is he such a doormat?!"

Lisbeth Eta-Denmersken was obviously a lost cause. It was actually within his power to relieve the Apprentice Mech Designer from her current post. Ves toyed with the idea of pulling the trigger, but held off because he knew he

would face a storm of protest from the design team and the Venerable himself.

Between Ves and O'Callahan, Major Verle would certainly choose to appease the latter. He needed the expert pilot's protection, and that meant appeasing the senile mech pilot's insane demands was a small price to pay for the mech officer.

As for Chief Leo, the easy-going old man was unlike every other chief technician he had seen. A chief needed to be authoritative and assertive in order to keep their mech technicians in line. Chief Leo demonstrated none of those qualities in front of Ves.

Both of them were problems to Ves. Perhaps no one aboard the Gorgon's Gaze had the guts to stand up to Venerable O'Callahan. This bred a situation where his cult had firmly taken root on that combat carrier.

"This is an impossible situation."

While Ves was not resigned to give up, he had no choice but to address the matter at a later date. Right now, he lacked a silver bullet that could resolve the problem in his favor.

Chapter 515 Squandering

"How's it looking, doc?"

"Some of your cells are wearing out faster than when you had your previous checkup. Your body is undergoing a subtle transformation. Towards what, we can't determine, but whether it is beneficial or not is hard to say."

In other words, the doctor knew as much as anyone. Ves exited the scanning chamber and dressed himself in his green uniform.

"Have you made any progress in your research?"

"I'm afraid not. There is much we don't understand about your so-called Jutland organ. All we can determine is that it contains an incredible amount of biological programming in an encrypted form. The good news is that it is largely dormant. The bad news is that anything can trigger some of the programming."

Nothing changed in that regard. Ves thanked the doctor for his work and left the Shield of Hispania's medical bay.

Ves remained compromised due to his biological gifts from Dr. Jutland. He only hoped the doctor hadn't put anything unpleasant in the programming. "He likely didn't anticipate that I would be able to call for rescue."

The doctor wanted him to live on the hostile underground environment of Groening IV, so the Jutland organ probably wasn't out to kill him. At least he hoped so. The madman might have included a failsafe in the energy organ's programming that only its originator could resolve.

"I've got to get rid of this organ or at least decypher its programming."

This wouldn't be easy. While the CFA took samples and cloned his body, Ves didn't expect to hear from them again. He needed to solve this problem on his own initiative.

"I'll need to enlist the help of a biomedical institution from the Friday Coalition at a minimum."

Not just anyone could knock on the doors of these prestigious institutions. Perhaps he could ask Master Olson for an introduction, but Ves preferred to solve his problems through his own means. As long as he progressed to Journeyman, a lot of doors would open for him in the Friday Coalition and in the Clifford Society.

"My best ticket to solve this problem is to earn lots of merits in the Society. As long as I have merits, I can spend them on exclusive services that aren't open to regular people."

The more he saw of the galaxy, the more he understood the importance of relationships and networks. For example, the Flagrant Vandals could have never pulled off the Detemen Operation without cultivating an alliance with the Vesian Revolutionary Front.

Each of them excelled at something that the opposite party wanted to make use of. Recognizing this fact opened up an opportunity for mutual cooperation.

Ves needed to do the same with regards to puzzling out the secrets locked inside his body. The energy cycle quietly circulated within his chest without fail. Though his questionable ghost of a mother alleviated some of the pressure early on, it had already returned to its old level, and actually began to compress more energy in the cycle.

He was worried that the pressure would be too much one day and blow his entire body up.

While he didn't know how much time he had left, he figured that he still had a good decade to go before some serious side effects cropped up.

"How did Dr. Jutland deal with this problem?"

The internal energy cycle must have been a deliberate design choice. Ves had the feeling he was missing something important. His body was basically an incomplete product.

To compare his current state to a mech, Ves imagined himself as a strengthened mech with a supercharged power reactor that constantly ran at full capacity. He didn't possess any weapons or systems where he could drain all of his excess energy.

"Still, it's dangerous to make too many assumptions about something I have no idea about."

For now, he pushed the issue to the back of his mind and turned back to the problems that fell within his area of expertise. After meeting the team that maintained Venerable O'Callahan's Parallax Star, Ves mentally wrote them off as potential allies.

"Miss Lisbeth is a total cook and Chief Leo is a firm believer."

Ves heard about how people would go crazy around expert pilots from his family. In the Age of Mechs, the popularity of mechs was at an all-time high. The norms worshipped the mech pilots, and the mech pilots worshipped the expert pilots.

It was almost impossible for an advanced mech pilot to succeed in breaking through an expert pilot. Their rarity and miraculous circumstances turned every expert pilot in an object of envy. Some people equated them to demigods for their amazing skill and mythical abilities.

When Ves returned to his office, he greeted Iris and looked at her with appreciation. He found her presence to be remarkably helpful. She stopped being annoying once she saw that her attempts to get him to waver in his loyalties only made him more suspicious.

Now that she became the perfect assistant to him, Ves truly appreciated the benefit of having a second mech designer at his beck and call. He could tell her to relay his instructions to others and take care of all manner of trivial tasks. He could talk advantage of her connections and friendships within the Vandals and the VRF.

Most importantly, she was a pretty decent mech designer as well, so Ves often used her as a sounding board for some of his ideas.

"I'm at my wits end with the Venerable's design team." Ves sighed. "Do you have any suggestions on how to restore their sanity? If I can just adjust their budget, I can allocate a lot more resources to where they are needed, such as strengthening the fragile Inheritor mechs. I've estimated that I can strengthen every Inheritor mech by five percent if I halve the Parallax Star's budget!"

That five percent didn't sound so much, but the Inheritor light skirmisher was the most prevalent spaceborn mech in the mech roster. A comprehensive strengthening of five percent could mean the difference between a narrow escape or a devastating loss.

"I'm not a miracle worker, boss." She responded with a flat expression.

"You're not the first head designer who's been cracking their head over this issue. Alloc hasn't been able to do anything and neither will you. Just face it, the Venerable knows we are desperate and don't have any other expert pilot to turn to. As long as Venerable O'Callahan can maintain his monopoly on expert-tier mech deterrence, he'll milk his advantage for all it's worth."

Ves let out a grunt in frustration. "It's wasteful! That selfish old man is squandering our resources! The worst thing about it is that the resources are literally going to waste! He's got so many spare parts that his design team can assemble at least two complete copies of the Parallax Star! The rationale for fabricating all of these different parts is impractical as well! The enemy won't stop their attacks wait for them to assemble the right configuration of parts."

"Efficiency seems to be one of your pet peeves. You can't stand it when someone is making suboptimal choices."

"I guess you're right." He sighed. "I feel incredibly frustrated to see something so wrong be allowed to continue without change. My mind just itches when I think about it. I constantly feel I have to do something about it. I'd do anything to make it stop!"

Normally, Ves was never a stickler for perfect efficiency. He fostered a slow and meticulous work culture at the LMC's Mech Nursery. He could have opted for more speed in order to increase their efficiency, but he wanted to maintain the best possible quality.

Too much efficiency wasn't always a good thing. The production methods he witnessed at Vaun Industrial pursued an extreme of efficiency that was endemic to large, well-run mech manufacturers.

There wasn't anything wrong with their pursuit, as it obviously allowed them to mass produce the largest amount of mechs at the lowest cost possible at very high speeds. These all sounded like ideal qualities to an industrialists who pursued the maximum amount of profit.

A consummate craftsman like Ves couldn't accept the pursuit of profit above all else. A mech was a wonderful machine and deserved some consideration. It took time and effort to build a quality product, and a naked pursuit for efficiency neglected many subtle and indefinable attributes that separated a masterpiece from a mass produced commodity.

In this paradigm, expert mechs always measured at the other end of the extreme. Each and every expert mech was a highly customized machine designed to interface with only one unique customer. It was a mech that was designed, fabricated, modified and maintained for the use of one expert pilot.

It wasn't worth it to go through all of that trouble for a single regular mech pilot. It only became cost-effective to do so for expert pilots because their amazing capabilities more than made up for the investment.

The only problem here was that O'Callahan is pushing it way past common sense. The Parallax Star didn't get any stronger. At most, it had a few more tools at its disposal, but it would take too much time to swap the parts.

"I hate to say it to you, boss, but you're going to have to deal with it." Iris said when she saw that Ves was still struggling to come up with a solution. "The multiverse isn't perfect. You don't always get what you want, and perfection is never easy to obtain. Maintaining the status quo is the least-bad option. Every other option would weaken the task force or see you fired."

She was right. Ves didn't want to admit it. He felt he should have been clever enough to come up with a golden solution that would have addressed the problem without making things worse.

In the end, he shrugged. "I don't have any options right now. I'll leave the issue be, but I'll definitely return on it once the situation changes."

Ves proceeded to distract himself by throwing himself to the complicated task of planning out the task force's mech composition. He already had a good idea what he wanted to adjust.

The scarcity of certain critical resources limited much of his options. Though the Vandals looted a huge amount of valuable exotics and other materials from the Detemen System, they prioritized exotics known with a high volume to price ratio. Most of these materials weren't suitable to be the main ingredients to repair or enhance their existing stock of mechs.

If Ves planned his mech composition around the meager strategic stockpiles in the cargo holds, he found out that the task force would quickly run dry within a week.

He remembered that the Vandals arrived in the Detemen System with largely empty cargo holds in order to carry away as much loot as possible. This didn't leave much room for critical supplies that could keep the Vandals going.

The task force would never be able to reach the Reinald Republic without obtaining more supplies.

"Iris, please schedule a meeting with Lieutenant Commander Soapstone. I'm going to need her help and advice. Make it a longer appointment if possible."

"On it, boss."

A few minutes later, she confirmed the appointment. "You can meet with her after the fleet jumps back into FTL. Right now, she's busy with allocating the resources we've mined from this system's asteroid belt."

"Understood."

The Vandals couldn't do anything outside their ship as long as they travelled through FTL. Thus, the fleet cherished any moment they popped out of the higher dimensions in order to cycle down their FTL drives and mine some extra resources from the local star system.

"We won't always get lucky and emerge in an empty or rebel-controlled star system." He whispered. "Iris, do you know how many transitions we have to go through before we're out of Imodris?"

"One or two more jumps, no more." She said. Since she was also a representative of the VRF, she knew a little more about Major Verle's intentions. "I think we'll only do a larger jump rather than two smaller ones because Major Verle really wants to shake off any pursuers from Imodris. They're mad as hell."

"Alright."

A larger jump enabled them to cover more distance, but made it easier for the enemies to track and anticipate their destination. It was a decision that traded security for speed.

"Hopefully we won't get caught by Imodris at our next destination."

Chapter 516 Uphill Battle

Ves emerged from Soapstone's office with a tired but energetic look. In the last three hours, he finally got to meet with Lieutenant Commander Soapstone who apprised him of their logistical situation.

The entire discussion ran on for hours as Soapstone patiently educating him about her own challenges. Most of it was boring and tedious, but Ves forced himself to memorize the points she raised.

In any case, Ves received the answers that he wanted to hear. With Major Verle's approval, she arranged numerous trades with the regional rebel groups that haunted the Venidse, Klein and Hafner duchies.

"Venidse's rebel movement is able to channel most of the resources that you need to us. Mind you, we aren't acquainted with this particular group, and they know that they're our only effective supplier. This means they'll certainly try to take advantage by charging triple of what they're selling while paying a fraction of the valuables we've obtained from the Detemen System."

Ves sensed her unspoken message. "So you want to keep the trade as small as possible?"

Soapstone nodded. "Our profits from the Detemen venture will evaporate if we try to fulfill every item on your wishlist. It's simply not economical for us to fulfill your ambitious plans."

He quietly cursed at that. Couldn't these rebels recognize that the Vandals could be their allies? Ves was forced to set his sights lower and acquire the bare minimum of what was necessary to keep all of the piloted mechs in fighting shape. He couldn't spare any extra attention to the spares.

Even then, his means fell short of being able to bring every mech to a functional condition. The attrition some of the Vandal mechs endured on Detemen IV needed an extensive overhaul.

As a result, the task force needed to get past the Imodris and Venidse territories while slightly understrength. "Fortunately, our spaceborn mechs haven't suffered too much damage compared to our landbound machines."

Yet that didn't mean the landbound mechs would be mothballed. Venidse was relatively rich in resources and many of its star systems contained valuable mines. Soapstone quietly revealed to Ves that Major Verle and his staff was considering the possibility to raid one of Venidse's prosperous star systems to supplement their deficient resource outlook.

Soapstone explained the rationale to him. "The rebels charge so much because they're short on resources and need the money as much as we do. Rather than let them rip us off, it's better for us if we can cut out the middleman and go for the source."

Ves almost had a heart attack when he heard this notion. "Many of our landbound mechs aren't up for a planetary raid!"

"Tough luck then, head designer. Major Verle doesn't want to hear it. We Vandals have endured worse situations. If our mech pilots have to pilot damaged mechs, then so be it. We really need those resources."

Soapstone also hinted that they would perform more raids along the way, because every rebel group was simply demanding too much. The Flagrant Vandals already paid a substantial amount of money to facilitate their passage through hostile space.

"Can you tell me about any large-scale deployments in the works? It would help me out if I know what I can expect in the future."

"There are two important missions that we will likely accept in exchange for obtaining extra assistance from the regional rebel groups. The first one consists of destroying an important defensive installation in the Klein Duchy.

The second one entails freeing important prisoners from a jail in the Hafner Duchy."

Both of them sounded like it would require the Vandals to put in their best effort, especially the first mission. Attacking a defensive fortification head-on was not a light matter, and the more mechs on the field, the better.

Ves groaned yet again. "This is really too much. You're running the Vandals ragged at this rate. I'm sure your mech pilots are able to tough it out, but mechs are exceedingly complex machines. It's easy to see them as invincible machines of war, but their impervious performance is only possible due to the incredible amount of work being done behind the scenes."

"I'm aware of that." Soapstone retorted, reminding Ves that she excelled in logistics, which most mech officers plainly never thought about. "Yet we are also under a lot of pressure. We made it out of the Detemen System with a lot of riches, but until we are able to reach a friendly or neutral trading system and sell them off at acceptable prices, we won't be able to derive any benefits from our loot at all. Our current resource-rich state is an illusion. All of our wealth is locked away in hard-to-dispose, illiquid goods."

He understood then that the task force was in a much worse state than he initially believed. It was as if a group of robbers infiltrated a mansion in the middle of a city and stole some precious jewels. Now, the entire city turned hostile against the robbers, leaving them nowhere to sell their ill-gotten gains.

Only by escaping the city and reaching a neighboring one would the heat die down. By then, they could calmly enter any store to sell the jewels at fairer prices.

"So there's at least three different landbound deployments in the horizon. A raid in Venidse, a mission in Klein and another one in Hafner, is that all?"

"That should be all. We're reluctant to plan for more because every deployment slows us down. We still need to reach the Reinald Republic within less than two months."

Thank the heavens for that. Ves quietly sighed in relief since they at least remembered that they needed to adhere to a deadline. Otherwise the sheer amount of deployments would have turned him crazy already.

The rest of the discussion mainly revolved around the details and finer points. At first, it didn't seem to Ves that any of it mattered, but he slowly realized that it was important for him to know some crucial details.

The information he received encompassed tidbits such as what kind of resources Venidse extracted from their mines to where they would be able to obtain medium-density mech-grade fuel.

With his expanded Intelligence, Ves easily memorized all of these important details. If Lieutenant Commander Soapstone found it important enough to mention it to him, then it was worthwhile for him to memorize it all. Some of this information may come handy in the future.

With a bucket load of information stuffed in his head, Ves returned to his office and reworked his own planning according to the new information. He had to get over the fact that his plan left no options but to deploy mechs that still needed some repairs.

The main issue he faced was that it took too much resources to repair all of their landbound mechs. Through some possible trades in the following three territories, the task force might be able to supplement their most critical needs, but this was just a metaphorical drop in the ocean compared to the actual problem.

Making this planning taxed his mental capacities to the limit. In truth, Ves should have involved some capable assistants to share the load, but besides Iris, Ves could only turn to his supposed deputies.

Thinking about trust the likes of Mercator and Trozin with this responsibility made him feel ill at ease. "They're not trustworthy enough, and much of this information is sensitive."

Ves was resigned to work at it by himself. As the planning came together, he felt as if his head started to overheat. He needed to lay down his work.

He turned off his terminal and looked around and noticed that Iris was already gone.

"The shift is already over?"

The clock that displayed the standard time revealed that it was midnight right now. Ves stretched his limbs and eased his mind onto other matters.

"I wonder how the LMC is doing?"

As head researcher, Ves had limited access to the galactic net. Much of his access only allowed him to receive data in a passive manner. He wasn't allowed to transmit any information except what was necessary to access some of it in the first place. In essence, his access to the galactic net amounted to a read-only limitation.

He browsed some of the articles and tried to look up the winner for the award of Best Mech Design of the Year.

"Damn, I lost!"

His mech design only received an honorable mention from the Bentheim Mech Court. In the segment that his Crystal Lord was competing on, the Senior Mech Designers that made up the Court decided to hand over the award to an admittedly worthy and brilliant striker mech design.

A brief look told Ves that the Crystal Lord didn't lose unjustly to this striker mech. He couldn't fault the Bentheim Mech Court for being biased. "The Crystal Lord is a good design, but it has its limitations."

He read up on how the LMC was doing, but the public news reports only mentioned what they perceived from the surface. For example, they could tell that the Mech Nursery ramped up their production, but they couldn't determine how many production lines had been added to the underground manufacturing complex.

One interesting development was that the Crystal Lord gained two different categories of clients. First, some of the Bentheim mech regiments ordered dozens of silver-label Crystal Lords on a trial basis. The news portal that reported this rumor claimed that some of the mech regiments wanted to pimp out the mechs piloted by their officers.

Ves had mixed feelings about the idea. "The Crystal Lord isn't a military-grade mech."

While he was confident his mech could keep up with most other military-developed mechs, the widespread adoption of the Crystal Lord would certainly introduce some difficulties to these mech regiments.

His perspective was wider now. Having access to all of the information at the disposal of a head designer, Ves was keenly aware of the complications that ensued by mixing military-grade mechs with machines meant for a different audience. The Vandals suffered substantially from this problem because much of their mechs consisted of salvaged or stolen Vesian mechs.

The main benefit to military-grade mechs was that they're designed to work with a common set of standards, parts and measurements, even among different designs. This streamlined the maintenance process and lightened the burden of fielding several different models of mechs.

It was not to the extent of incorporating every separate model in a single product family, but just a handful of commonalities was enough to ease a mech regiment's logistical concerns.

As for the Crystal Lord, not only did it make use of fairly unique components derived from Coalition licenses, its laser rifle and chest crystal could only be produced at the Mech Nursery. The silver and gold label mechs distinguished themselves from the bronze-label version fabricated by third party manufacturers by carrying activated alien crystals.

As far as Ves was aware of, there was only one crystal cube in existence that could activate the synthesized crystals.

"This is going to be a problem for the LMC. I hope Calsie won't be stupid enough to give up the crystal cube."

Besides closing some deals with the Mech Corps, the Crystal Lord also proved to be a surprising hit in the Ylvain Protectorate. They even loosened up their harsh import restrictions to obtain more copies of his premium rifleman mech.

Though he was a little confused why the Ylvains adored the Crystal Lord model all of a sudden, he wasn't about to turn away a customer.

Ves looked up some other news about home, but only for an hour or so. He couldn't let himself be consumed by thoughts at home, not while the Vandals still needed to fight their way out of Vesian space.

He initially thought it would be a difficult but manageable ordeal to leave the Kingdom. Now that he became responsible for the task force's mechs, he realized what an uphill battle he faced.

"Heh. It's more of a cliff than a hill. Try climbing that."

Chapter 517: Dynamic Mech Roster

He finished it . While it took some time, he completed an entire plan for the task force's mech roster that took every major factor into account .

He took into account the skills and capabilities of every mech company, the inclinations of their commanding officers, the available resources that logistics agreed to release for repair work, the likely opposition they faced at various points of time and a projection of what kind of resources they would be able to obtain .

The latter two variables introduced an incredible amount of complexity to his work . Ves had been forced to make assumptions and use his own judgement to fill in the gaps . His increasingly more intricate plan became more flexible as Ves added options in case his assumptions turned out to be wrong .

The dynamic planning took up a lot of time to read and understand, but the basic point of it was to deploy the best possible Vandals mechs at any time within their limitations . Ves minimized as much intervals as possible where they could be caught with their pants down, for example by transitioning hundreds of mechs from one configuration to another . Most of the mass overhauls could take place within the safety of FTL travel .

Ves smiled as he deactivated the privacy screen around his desk and leaned back on his chair . The work was demanding, and he frequently felt as if his brain overheated, but once he finished his work, he experienced a rare moment of fulfillment .

"Did you finish it, boss?"

"I did! It's too bad I'm not allowed to show it off to you . It would be fatal for us if this plan gets leaked out . "

He meticulously cleaned up his terminal of any traces of his work . Fortunately, the Vandals like every mech regiment of the Mech Corps utilized highly-developed routines that did most of the heavy lifting .

Once he ported his data over to a secure data chip, he stood up and left his office, and navigated the Shield of Hispania until he reached Major Verle's door .

After a brief security check and wait, the major commanded him to enter his stateroom . Ves took a seat behind the desk and passed over the data chip .

"Took you long enough, Mr . Larkinson . " The Major grunted as he immediately inserted the chip into his terminal .

"I had to do all of the planning alone . I don't quite trust my subordinates to keep their mouths shut . "

"That's not a good sign . Even if you're the head designer and the best of the bunch, you need to get a grip on your direct subordinates . The point of a hierarchy is to distribute the workload . You can't do that if you don't trust your own underlings . "

Ves shrugged at that . It wasn't as if he could tell Verle that he wouldn't be able to command Mercator and Trozin's loyalty unless he became a Journeyman . Mech designers of their level acquired an innate arrogance that became hard to tame unless they faced a higher-ranking mech designers .

Even if Ves displayed more ability than them, he couldn't suppress them by virtue of that alone . While most Apprentice Mech Designers could never match his extensive knowledge and skills, they still subconsciously thought they were on the same level .

He waited quietly while Major Verle perused the expansive plan . While Ves provided summaries, it took at least half an hour of reading to get the gist of his decisions .

"I see you've provided three different options for me . " Verle said and looked up from his terminal . "What are the differences?"

"They differ mainly depending on which kind of mechs you want to retain when we reach the Hafner Duchy . I anticipate we'll need to be at our strongest at that point, sir . "

Verle nodded in agreement . "Venidse and Hafner will be our toughest opponents . The former because it will be difficult to disentangle ourselves from their forces and the latter because they're good at sniffing us out . "

The older man palmed his stubby chin after mentioning those two powers . The Vandal commander did not relish facing both of them in battle, but their current circumstances compelled them into a possible collision course .

Ves proceeded to spend the next hour guiding Major Verle through a broad outline of his plan .

"Right now, we're on our way out of Imodris and still have to carry out essential repairs..."

"When we reach Venidse, I've heard there will be a possible raid on the horizon . My men will direct the mech technicians to make some essential repairs on these landbound mechs..."

"I don't project we'll face a lot of challenges in the Klein Duchy, but their long-ranged firepower focus can be devastating if they wish to harass us . We're going to have to lean on the Inheritor mechs to teach them a lesson..."

"I don't think we can avoid a pitched battle against Hafner . They'll track us down and force us into battle eventually, so I've planned for the worst . We'll to bring up the heavy stuff and modify our spaceborn mechs to withstand their initial charge..."

Ves justified each of his decisions with evidence, and if he lacked enough backing from that, he supplemented it with reasonable assumptions . The plan also possessed a lot of branches that provided alternatives to Major Verle . The three major options that Major Verle took note of could be described as three different flavors that put more emphasis on a particular strategy .

Personally, Ves favored the option that elevated the Inheritor light skirmishers into their mainstay mechs . He always felt a bias for this poor underdog of a mech model and wished that the Vandals took them seriously for once . Out of all of their spaceborn mechs, the Inheritor was one of their most prevalent model . It was well worth investing them in his eyes .

Sadly, Major Verle had other ideas . "I like this option . The Hellcat hybrid knights provides me with the most tactical flexibility . They're excellent whether they are spread out among the mech companies or gathered into specialized squads . "

"Sir, I think you should take a serious look at the Inheritor option . It's our most numerous mech, after all, and their speed is their best asset . "

"They are useful, but they only serve a narrow role . " Verle shook his head . "Their biggest demerit is that they do not excel at defense and that they're countered by Hafner's mech doctrine . There is no little use in trying to maintain their strength for the final stretch . It is better to use them up beforehand . "

And with those heartless words, his suggestion died a silent grave . Ves bowed his head in apology for the Inheritor mech pilots that would soon be running the gauntlet . There was no way they'd be able to take it easy .

"There are a number of points that seem dubious to me . I'd like you to change some of these aspects . "

Major Verle provided a small number of key changes . Most of it concerned the modifications that Ves suggested to be made in order to gear the mechs against specific opponents . For example, to counter against Venidse stealth

attacks, he planned to turn the Inheritor mechs into mobile sentries that meticulously scanned their vicinity for any anomalies with upgraded sensors .

"This upgrade is too demanding in terms of resources . Instead of incorporating the sensor upgrades on half of the Inheritors, it's sufficient if only twenty percent of our complement carry this sensor system . We should have just enough Inheritors to provide full spherical coverage around our fleet . "

"That will be cutting it close, sir . The coverage wouldn't have as much depth . It's easier for Venidse to sneak their stealth mechs past our patrols if we only put up a single detection layer around our ships . "

"We won't be relying solely on the Inheritors to do their jobs . Don't forget our combat carriers . They can provide us with a second detection layer . "

"By the time the combat carriers detect something wrong, it's already too late, sir . "

Ves had a good point, but Major Verle wanted to allocate more resources elsewhere . Since the major was in command, Ves had no choice but to yield and adjust his plans .

They talked over other many issues, and while Ves had to change many details, he was able to convince the major to stick to the plan . Overall, they refined the plan in a way that made more sense to a true Vandal . Ves had only stuck to them for less than half a year . It was natural that his knowledge of the Vandal fighting style contained a lot of holes .

"I'm satisfied with the work you've done, Mr . Larkinson . I'll provisionally approve of this plan for now so we can start pouring our resources where they are necessary . I want you to attend the next meeting that I'm holding with my staff so that we can benefit from their input . "

"I'll be there, sir . "

Ves was satisfied that Major Verle largely accepted his plan . His hard work hadn't gone to waste, and the mech officer didn't fault too many of his assumptions . Ves felt as if he made a genuine contribution to the survival of the task force .

Major Verle kicked Ves out of his wardroom shortly after . The meeting ate up a lot of their time, and they needed to fulfill their other obligations . Ves neglected many of his other responsibilities while he became consumed with planning out their mech roster .

"Planning our mech roster is a head designer's most important responsibility, but that doesn't mean I can sit back and relax once I've finished planning . "

His second major responsibility as a head designer was to lead the other mech designers and make sure they weren't up to no good . Even if mech designers were smart, it wasn't a good idea to loosen their reins .

He paused to consider his most pressing issue . Major Verle already issued a warning to him, and he didn't intend to neglect it any longer .

"I have no way to command my subordinates except to invoke my official authority . While it works in a pinch, it won't work in the longer term . I've got to work on cultivating some trustworthy subordinates . "

Ves cast his eyes to the future when he made this decision . Even after the task force completed their mission, Iris was right in that the Vandals might appoint Ves to another leadership position in the future . The Vandals were awfully short-handed and they didn't have enough Senior and Journeyman Mech Designers to supervise every important project .

While Ves didn't necessary dream of a career within the Vandals . If possible, he didn't wish to clash against other careerist mech designers who wanted to climb up the ladder like Mercator . Yet their relative lack of competence compelled Ves to compete against them, if only so that he would be spared from following the orders of someone who didn't know what he was doing .

"At the heart of it, the only reason why the mech designers attached to the Vandals are in such an awful shape is because there aren't enough of us!"

It wasn't too hard for the Flagrant Vandals to recruit low-ranking mech designers through their own recruiting channels . Yet these people didn't really bring too much to the table . In order to obtain mech designers with several successes to their name, the Vandals needed to rely on the generosity of the Mech Corps .

"Heh, even if we've pulled off a daring raid in the Detemen System, I don't think they'll change their mind . "

Many other Vandals expressed the same cynical sentiment . Their disdain for the Republic and the Mech Corps made it hard for them to hope for a helping hand .

In other words, Ves needed to work with the mech designers they already had . No matter if they were conscripted like Ves or volunteered like Mercator, both of these types possessed their own competencies .

Still, thinking about their low numbers, Ves thought back on his observation that all of the Apprentice Mech Designers had only entered into the mech regiment's service for less than five years . Except for the Journeymen and

Professor Velten, every other mech designer transferred away for one reason or another .

When Ves returned to his office, he turned on his terminal and entered the personnel files . Ves used his head designer privileges to investigate the reason for the transfers, but it turned out that this matter was not as simple as he thought .

"Insufficient clearance? What? I'm the head designer!"

This obstacle reminded him that he only scratched the surface of the Flagrant Vandals . Ves always felt as if something ominous hid behind their simplistic nature .

Chapter 518: Carrot and Stick

Ves scheduled another comprehensive meeting . Every mech designer in the task force had been ordered to attend it, though it was sufficient for them to show up as projections . They could hardly enter a shuttle and transfer over to the Shield of Hispania while the entire task force entered FTL .

In the meantime, Ves fulfilled some of his other responsibilities . He paid a visit to each of the Shield of Hispania's hangar bays to provide consultations for the resident mech pilots and mech technicians .

He spent days drawing upon the full potential of his formidable mind to fill out an expansive but fairly abstract plan . Staring at the developing mech roster all day disconnected him from the mechs and people that the numbers represented . Ves couldn't let himself become too detached to reality .

"Mr . Larkinson, can you teach us how to increase this laser rifle's heat capacity?"

"I don't understand why this mech glitches out whenever its power reactor reaches twenty-seven percent capacity! We've been thinking about replacing it with another one, but it's too costly if we proceed with this solution!"

"I heard you've got a good touch for mechs! Every mech you laid your hands on feels great for every mech pilot! Can you bless our mechs as well?"

The low-level problems didn't require much effort for Ves to address . He found it relaxing in a way to forget about his heaviest responsibilities and return to basics . Ves always believed that the best mech designer needed to rely on both theory and practice to advance their understanding of the craft .

"Knowledge advances our technical understanding of mechs, but practice allows us to develop our artistic side . "

Not every mech designer agreed that their profession incorporated art or craftsmanship . This was different from other design professions such as architects who constantly try to influence the people that inhabited the structures they designed .

Ves found it kind of sad that most of the mech designers he had met among the Vandals ascribed to a different school of thought . They leaned more towards a functional or utilitarian perspective of mechs .

This viewpoint expressly rejected any subjective attachments to mechs and only cared about their objective performance . The spec sheets were holy and the numbers never lied .

Having corresponded with the likes of Iris, Pierce and Laida, Ves understood that this was common among the mech designers who worked as grunts in design teams .

"They don't have the power to exert any influence on the designs they are working on . They are only there to perform some menial tasks . "

Only the highest-ranked mech designers that led the design teams had a use for their artistic side .

"The high-ranking mech designers among us don't just need to reach the rank of Apprentice, they also have to develop their first original design by themselves . How did they even manage to accomplish this?"

Independent mech designers like Ves who founded their own businesses turned out to be very rare . While Ves himself knew that most mech designers shied away from the risks and the high barriers to entry associated with going it alone, too many mech designers opted to go for the easy road .

While these mech designers pursued honest careers, their overspecialization atrophied their ability to design a complete mech by themselves .

"A mech designer who specializes in legs won't know what to do when they have to design the other portions of a mech . "

At the very least, there would be a noticeable imbalance of quality . Yet even then, mech designers like Mercator and Iris somehow made the cut . How did they do it?

Ves checked the MTA's expansive archives and looked up their first original designs . He quickly found out that they used the same strategy they employed during the design duel .

"They ripped off another design . "

Truly, the definition of what constituted an 'original' design was hard to pin down . If Ves copied the Caesar Augustus but coated it black instead of white, then nobody would accept he designed an original mech . Yet if he attempted to design a vague copy of the Caesar Augustus while making use of different component licenses, then he arguably designed an 'original' mech .

Even if the imitation possessed highly similar specs to the original, it still constituted an original design to the MTA . Their exact criteria on the matter was a secret . Suffice to say, the actual hurdle wasn't very high to most mech designers .

"Did I make too much of a fuss when I debuted my own work to the public?"

No . A proper first original design attracted a fair amount of publicity . Ves followed the tradition sincerely and got rewarded for it with plenty of coverage that boosted the marketing for his Blackbeak design .

As for the poor imitations and ripoffs designed by his colleagues within the mech regiment? The MTA may have validated their designs, but their only practical use was to collect dust in the archives . No one spared a glance at their so-called debut works, and this lack of distinction would certainly become a hindrance to their careers if they tried to make something of themselves in the private sector .

"They may be able to get past the MTA, but they can't fool the market . "

Time passed until the time for the meeting began . Ves sat himself at the front of the conference room . The seats had been constrained in concentric circles this time to foster a sense of equality . The main reason why he called for this meeting was to address the concerns of lower-ranking mech designers who did most of the actual grunt work in the fleet .

Emitters flared up as lifelike projections of people appeared inside the conference room . They quietly took their places and wondered why he scheduled this meeting .

Familiar faces such as Pierce, Mercator and Trozin sat in the inner circle . Numerous amounts of lower-ranked mech designers sat in the outer circles . Ves focused his gaze on each and every one of them . Some met his stares, others instantly bent their heads or shield away .

This was what he expected, and frankly hoped for . Ves placed much stock on these Novice and fairly junior Apprentice Mech designers that revered him . In his eyes, they were like loose clay, ready for him to be shaped in any form he wanted .

As for the higher-ranked Apprentices, none of them really looked at him with reverence . Oh, they respected his skills and acknowledged his prowess, but they never thought he was better than them . Only Pierce feared him a little bit because he witnessed what Ves was fully capable of during their boot camp .

Iris didn't fear him at all, but Ves already had a good rapport with her . As the only physical mech designer present, she stood out from the other occupants as her body appeared just a bit more real than others . Despite the excellent quality of projectors, human eyes were much more capable in certain aspects than machines .

When everyone's virtual avatars arrived, Ves stood up and began the meeting . "Thank you for coming here today . We've got a number of points on the agenda to go through . First, let me announce to you that a provisional plan for our mech roster has received Major Verle's approval . I don't expect any major changes to the plan, so it is essentially a done project . "

"Can we obtain copies of the plan, sir? It's hard to work while blind! I don't know if I need to enhance a mech's speed or armor for the next deployment . "

Ves shook his head . "I'm afraid I can't do that . A lot of sensitive information can be derived from the full plan . Even the summaries are enough to plunge the Vandals into a crisis if someone leaks them out to the Vesians . For now, I'll only release information to you on a need to know basis . "

Mercator raised his hand . "Head designer, as your deputies, it would be helpful for us to be acquainted with your plan . Will you allow us access to some of the details? We only need enough to make some preparations . "

"As I've stated before, you'll be informed when you need to know at that point in time . " Ves glibbed while trying to keep his smile hidden .

He really didn't like Mercator, but he thought it would be unprofessional to show his displeasure at his own deputy . He wouldn't give Mercator or any snake the satisfaction to see him make a blunder . In any case, words were cheap, and Ves felt no guilt in answering with a lie or non-answer .

In any case, Ves could tell that Mercator hadn't been taken in by the nonsense, but wisely refrained from making a fuss .

"Mr . Larkinson, if nobody gets to access the details beforehand, will all of us be working blind?" Trozin asked her own question .

"I'll essentially drip-feed your assignments when they need to be done . It's not ideal, but it minimizes the damage should any of this leaks out . I don't want to hand over our entire itinerary for the next two months to the Vesians .

Everyone chuckled at that, though the prospect wasn't all that funny .

Ves explained a few more things and even revealed the first step of the plan, which wasn't too complicated . "A possible landbound deployment is in the air, so make sure you divert at least half of your focus on landbound mechs that can be fixed with ease . Prioritize the easy cases first and leave the heavily damaged mechs for later . "

Some of them looked surprised that they needed to work on the landbound mech . After all, wouldn't a straightforward flight from Vesian space be a straight run to the border? Ves didn't let out anything about the topic after that, but he figured the inquisitive mech designers would figure out the motivations on their own soon enough .

"Now, I'll be demanding that you work as hard as possible for the next two months . We need to maximize our productivity and minimize our waste . Anyone who slacks off or fobs off their assigned to a mech technician or something will be punished harshly!"

Ves emphasised the importance of hard work because the plan demanded a lot of changes to be made at critical intervals in the next two months .

Perhaps someone foresaw the sheer amount of work Ves would soon pile up on their shoulders . "Sir, we aren't bots who can't work all day! We need our rest moments!"

"Tough luck, then . We're at war, and we're knee-deep in enemy territory . Relax when you sleep . Otherwise, go to work . The more we get things done, the stronger the Vandals become . "

More people started to furrow their brows . They faintly suspected that Ves would start to become their slave driver .

Ves grinned and gestured towards Mercator and Trozin . "My deputies will keep an eye on your productivity . If you haven't been meeting your targets, they'll be sure to whip you back into shape!"

The two deputies looked surprised at Ves for giving them this duty . However, it made sense for them to be their supervisors because that was what deputies should do . In any case, Ves wouldn't have to bother with the tedium while the other mech designers became a little more guarded in front of the deputies .

Naturally, since Ves showed off his stick, he should also introduce the carrot . "I don't expect you to work for nothing . Anyone who meets their targets for the week will receive the right to borrow one Journeyman-level textbook from

the central database of the Mech Corps . It'll be yours to peruse for an entire month!"

That lit a fire under their butts . No mech designer wanted to stay stagnant, and for most of them, a quality Journeyman-level textbook from the Mech Corps was a highly sought-after commodity!

"That's not all! Those who exceed their targets by a fair margin will receive greater privileges . Those who are eligible can either exchange it for the right to borrow another textbook for half a year, or the opportunity to receive my personal tutelage for an entire hour!"

That caused the mech designers to really take notice . Textbooks weren't easy to digest, and the mech designers also needed to fulfill their other duties before they had time to study new knowledge . Being allowed to borrow a textbook for half a year would be enough for them to understand at least ninety-five of its contents!

As for an hour's worth of personal tutoring from Ves, this potential reward turned out to be very polarizing!

Chapter 519: Teaching

Ves lacked many advantages that could shore up his position .

First, he wasn't a genuine Journeyman, so he wouldn't be able to command respect by virtue of his status . Even if he had the biggest fist at the moment, many mech designers subconsciously believed that this would be a temporary state .

It was much like how older advanced mech pilots all considered themselves as equals in skill . They all ran into the bottleneck that barred their way towards metamorphosing into an expert pilot . Even if they excelled in different skills, all of them were the same in the eyes of an expert pilot .

Second, Ves was an outsider . He didn't know anyone from before the Mech Corps drafted him and even his fellow alumni from the Rittersberg University of Technology didn't know him . To be honest, back then he was so mediocre that no one bothered to pay attention to him . He wasn't like Patricia Schneider, who stood out as a genius out of place from the start .

Banding out his connection to Master Olson didn't help much either . It explained his superiority to them, but rather acknowledging his accomplishment of gaining a Master's attention, they envied him instead . Jealousy was a powerful human emotion that motivated countless people to irrational decisions .

Third, their current conditions made it hard to form any bond . With the fleet moving through FTL for most of its two-month journey, every mech designer needed to interact with each other through comms and projections . Though virtual technology made it easy to connect to each other, it was no substitute to being physically present in the same room .

Besides, with the work schedules that Ves planned to hand out week by week, everyone would be too busy to socialize . Those who reached their work targets faster than scheduled might squeeze some moments together, but those would be few and far in between .

He thought back on his resolve to leverage what he possessed in order to get what he wanted . If he could leverage his unique talents in mech design to trade for the assistance of a biomedical institution to figure out his body, then why not use those same talents to achieve other goals?

Mech design was the only thing he was good at, and for a long time Ves thought himself as an ant among giants . With the existence of higher-ranked mech designers such as Journeymen, Seniors, Masters and Star Designers, Ves truly felt as if he had been playing with the sand .

Even if he had the fortuitous assistance of the Mech Designer System, the device only let him catch up a little faster .

It was only recently that his opinion of himself had undergone a shift . Interacting with so many different mech designers during his tour with the Flagrant Vandals allowed him to understand his place .

"I am more than an Apprentice but less than a Journeyman . "

He wasn't close to advancing . He could feel that deep within his bones . Yet he happened to be closer to the threshold than anyone else in the Verle Task Force, so Ves happened to possess the most qualifications to be a teacher .

What did other mech designers desire the most? They shared the same dream as Ves . They wanted to reach past their limitations and progress their ability to design mechs until they reached the pinnacle in their profession .

To do that, they needed to learn and improve . Studying textbooks was one way they would be able to absorb new knowledge, but having someone more knowledgeable teaching them the essence of what they missed was of incredible value .

Ves liked to think he would make for a great teacher . After all, his unorthodox learning process through the System crammed him with an extensive understanding of several fields . It lacked the holes, biases,

misunderstandings and outdated theories that everyone else had to struggle with as they read their way through stuffy textbooks .

As Ves announced the option to choose for an hour's worth of tutoring from him, most of the higher-ranked mech designers adopted a disdainful look . What he achieved, they could achieve as well . That was what they believed in their hearts .

Only a couple of people that knew him better possessed an inkling of its value . If they could let go of their pride, they definitely stood to benefit a lot .

As for the lower-ranked mech designers, they didn't have much pride to begin with . In front of their colleagues who achieved substantial success, their self-worth had long been ground to dust . As far as the Vandals were concerned, these bunch of failures never got off the starting line .

They weren't 'real' mech designers, not like Ves or Pierce or even the likes of Mercator .

Yet because they never got a proper start, they desired what their more successful peers achieved more than anything else . Ves could see the hunger in the expressions of their projections . Some hid it better than others, but almost every mech designer sitting in the back seats felt their long-dormant hope beginning to ignite .

Ves smirked inwardly at that . He successfully planted the seeds within their minds . Time would tell whether they germinated .

The rest of the meeting didn't contain any more bombshells . He handed out schedules of the work that needed to be done in the next few days . He tasked Mercator and Trozin to keep track of every mech designer's progress on top of their current duties . Ves didn't care if it ate away at their time .

He threw out one more warning before he ended the meeting .

"Be careful when the task force arrives at our next destination . It's our last stop before we leave the Imodris Duchy, so it is the only star system where our pursuers have a hope of stopping us . Everyone will be called to battle stations anyway, but I hope you realize there is a chance we'll be plunged into combat as soon as our ships emerge from FTL . "

Some of them shrugged them off, inured to their positions as non-combatants who wouldn't be exposed to much danger . What happened to Ves and Alloc was an exception . Maybe a few of them would take his warning seriously, but Ves didn't bet on it . In any case, he performed his due diligence .

The projections winked out at the end of the meeting . No doubt everyone hurried to study the work schedule that Ves just sent to their comms .

Over the next days, every mech designer settled into a new routine . Some still worked on spaceborn mechs while others started piecing together landbound mechs . Through various indicators that directly fed into his terminal, Ves kept a good gauge on everyone's progress .

Compared to past performance, at least half of the lower-ranked mech designers achieved more results . They acted like they had a fire lit under their butts and obviously attempted to exceed their weekly quotas .

When Ves showed the changes to Iris, she whistled in appreciation . "Your little offer works better than I thought, boss! I never realized how desperate these Novices are . Just an hour's worth of tutoring is enough to increase their productivity by a third!"

Perhaps not everyone would be able to maintain this level of hyperactive work, but that was good for Ves as well . He didn't relish staying stuck in his office tutoring over a dozen individual students .

"Not all of them are aiming for a tutoring session . " Ves added . "Some value the privilege of being able to borrow a textbook for half a year . Personally, I would go for this first before opting to receive a tutoring session, as the tutor can help me understand the contents of the book . "

A tutor only helped when the student already progressed their studies to a good extent . Only a full-blown teaching course would be able to help them understand a complete field from scratch .

As much as Ves was willing to be a teacher for a period of time, he didn't have the time to spare on such distractions . Maybe once the war came at an end, Ves would reconsider the matter .

In fact, the idea appealed to him in a way . Though Ves was never one for lofty thoughts such as feeling the obligation to contribute to the growth of the next generation, he at least felt some understanding for other mech designers that decided to take up a teaching position .

"I don't think you've offered to teach them out of a whim . What are you getting out of it, if I may ask?"

"Teaching is a good way to get in touch with some good seeds . " Ves responded . "If work at it hard enough, I can begin to build my own network . "

Even Professor Velten used to teach at an institution in the Republic before she worked for the Flagrant Vandals . The MTA provided incentives to anyone

that took up a teaching position, but even without that carrot mech designers still sought to pass on some of their knowledge .

Now that he reached a height where he could tentatively call himself a qualified teacher, Ves already started scheming on what kind of advantages he could get out of this side activity .

"Ah, so you're aiming to build your own influence among the Vandals . " Iris nodded .

"To be honest, forging some relationships during my stay with the Vandals is a bonus . A friend who is just a Novice Mech Designer isn't very useful to me . What I'm really trying to do is to reel in some promising seeds and invite them to join my ventures after the war . "

Iris looked at him with widened eyes . "That's really far-sighted of you, sir . This is an excellent idea! Comrades who've gone through thick and thin during a war share the most lasting bonds . "

Ves thought back about his uncles and aunts who told him stories when he was young . Those veterans often spoke fondly of their unbreakable connection with their comrades in arms . Some even visited them regularly to catch up on old times .

If the Mech Corps hadn't dragged him into the war, Ves would have resorted to cultivating relationships through teaching sooner or later . It was a good means to get in touch with promising mech designers that deserved some investment .

Naturally, there was always the possibility that Ves would pull out a gem from the rough, however minute this possibility actually turned out to be . If he taught someone half as smart as Oleg, he would quickly have a capable assistant at his beck and call .

Still, there were risks involved with teaching as well . Some might abuse his trust or aim to steal his secrets . If someone knew about any of his major secrets such as the existence of the System or his one attempt at breaking the taboo against weapons of mass destruction, Ves would instantly be hunted down by the most powerful organizations in the galaxy .

Others might turn out to be so talented that they might quickly surpass Ves . Before, they lacked the opportunity to show off their excellence . Poverty, lack of connections or just being a late bloomer doomed them into lowest echelons of mech designers . Once Ves recognized their talents pulled them up to his level, they would finally be able to spread their wings and show off their brilliance .

Ves didn't fear these occurrences, though he would definitely feel uneasy if any of these occurrences happened to him . That was the extent of it . "If I feel uncomfortable about something, then it's not something to reject . "

He believed he protected his secrets well enough . Also, if some prodigy managed to shoot up and become a Journeyman Mech Designer in record time, then that was nothing shameful . He wasn't petty to the point where he couldn't tolerate someone being better than him in mech design .

"There are already so many Senior and Master Mech Designers in the Komodo Star Sector alone . What is the harm of one more addition?"

Ves believed that with the help of the System, he could definitely become a Master within a century . He set his sights much higher, so it was more important that he laid the best foundation possible than to race up the ranks with no regard to the end run .

He couldn't help but think back on Morgan's theory that Apprentices shouldn't rush to advance to Journeyman . The mech designer that Ves briefly acquainted back at boot camp might possess some very odd ideas, but this one kept lingering in the back of his mind .

Chapter 520: Neural Interface

The gains and benefits of teaching took time to ferment . Right now, Ves felt like a farmer who just sowed his seeds . He needed to wait at least an entire season for the crops to grow ripe before he harvested the fruits of his labor .

Unexpectedly, an opportunity to practice his teaching came after they wrapped up the meeting . As soon as they returned to their office, Iris came up to his desk .

"Can you teach me?"

Ves blinked at the sudden request . Iris hadn't done anything to merit such a privilege . She had her own work to perform, so asking him to tutor her right now was highly inappropriate .

Still, he was never a stickler for rules . "As long as it doesn't affect your work too much, I'm fine if you want to receive some pointers . "

Iris put her hand on her hips and smirked . "I'm not expecting you to pass on your knowledge for nothing . Don't forget that I have my own strengths as a mech designer . My fundamentals aren't as solid as yours, but when it comes to neural interfaces, I dare say that even Professor Velten can't match the depth of my expertise!"

That was an extremely bold claim to make, and if Ves thought a little more highly of the old woman, he would have reprimanded his assistant .

"You shouldn't say such things out loud . " He responded mildly . "Also, the study of neural interfaces is severely restricted by the MTA . I need to obtain a permit from the Association before I'm allowed immerse myself in this field . "

"That's only important if you actually do something with your newly-gained knowledge, such as designing your own neural interfaces . The MTA will let it slide if I am just 'giving you some pointers' instead of trying to raise you up as a fully-fledged neural interface developer . I'm not allowed to pass on the core teachings of the Jupiter Family anyway . "

Ves mulled the proposition carefully . After committing a heinous war crime behind the MTA's back at the System's behest, his instinctive reverence towards the all-powerful organization had taken a significant hit . The idea of bending some of their rules to his advantage didn't sound as bad .

"Well, if you are sure they won't act, I'm open for an exchange . "

When Ves explained the Skills he was proficient in and revealed some of the extent of his depth in Physics, Iris looked very impressed at him . Somehow, her astonishment pleased him and spurred him on .

"It takes years of study and access to a lot of good textbooks to reach my level . However, I can grant you access to a handful of helpful titles to get you starting on shoring up your fundamentals . "

"That's great! I can't thank you enough! Still, I'll feel guilty if you gift me all of this help . I know I don't deserve it as I am right now . " Iris tapped her delicate chin . "How about this . Let me teach you more than a few pointers about neural interfaces . In fact, if you don't have anything urgent on the agenda, let's start right now!"

Ves recalled his current schedule and knew there was nothing on the agenda for today . "That's fine . I can determine whether it this topic fits with my interests . "

"From the Jupiter Family's perspective, a mech designer who neglects the importance of neural interfaces are stunted in their growth . In the eyes of my elders, the MTA has gone overboard in restricting the study and development of neural interfaces after the infamous Farund Affair . "

"Well, brainwashing through interfacing with your mech is a horrible nightmare that no sane person would wish to another . " Ves pointed out . "The sanctity

of the mind is a core value for humanity . When your thoughts have become the property of others, our race will cease to flourish . "

"Hmph . " Iris huffed and waved her hand dismissively . "Neural interface technology can be abused just as much as laser weapon or power reactor technology . In the wrong hands, they can achieve an enormous amount of devastation, but you never hear any reactor developer getting arrested for designing exploding products, do you?"

"Abuse of other technologies are easy to spot and easier to prevent . The damage that neural interfaces do is often invisible and pernicious . The fear of the unknown is often scarier than the planet-cracking superweapons of the past . "

"Well, let's agree to disagree then . " Iris gave up on this argument . To her, Ves had hopelessly been affected by too much MTA propaganda . "The point I was trying to make is that while neural interfaces can do a lot of damage in the wrong hands, the flip side is also true . A well-designed neural interface that is geared towards specific mech pilots can boost their effective performance by the same margin!"

Ves had often heard these kinds of claims, but it sounded fantasy back then . "How is this possible? A mech has a defined level of performance . It's impossible to exceed the parameters of a spec sheet . "

"I'm not talking about breaking the specs . " Iris shook her head . "As a mech designer, do you believe that a mech is constantly pushing its performance to match the upper limit of the specs in the spec sheet?"

Ves paused at that question . Just because a mech exhibited a top speed of a hundred kilometers per hour didn't meant it ran at that speed all the time . Most of the time they would briskly walk to their destination, if only to minimize their energy consumption .

"The spec sheets only define the upper limits of the specs . Mechs don't push that far most of the times . "

"This is the where a good neural interface can make the difference . They smoothen and facilitate the man-machine connection so that the thoughts of a mech pilot will lead to more responsive performance from the mech . This enables the combination to switch between high and low states of their parameters on a whim . The best analogy that my Family came up with would be like comparing a rubble-filled street with a well-paved street . Mechs are able to walk through a cleared street much more easily than a street that suffered the aftermath of a destructive battle . "

"So in other words, thoughts flow faster and more effortlessly with a better neural interface?"

"I wouldn't call it a better neural interface . There are ways you can elevate the absolute quality of an interface, but much of our craft concerns accommodating the unique minds of every mech pilot we've come across . "

"Then are interfaces doomed to be a customized product that's bound to a single mech designer?"

"Not to that extent . Instead, you can say that mech pilots fall into a couple of hundred different types . Do you know that some mech squads from the galactic center are grouped together because they possess the same neural profile? This allows them to pilot any mech in their squads without worrying about incompatibility . "

"Ah, but is it worth it? The mechs we are working with so far are doing fine without any fancy tricks with their neural interface . "

"That's because the MTA-mandated standard models are designed to be as compatible and complication-proof as possible . They're the safest and most limited models, and if you knew what neural interfaces are really capable of, you'll realize how crippled they really are!"

"Well, in exchange for opting with these limited neural interface models, I'll at least benefit from some peace of mind . " Ves retorted . "I don't think any standard neural interface model has ever malfunctioned since the MTA started promoting their use . "

Iris laughed at that . "To me, it sounds as if you are willingly taking the hardest road when there is a much more easier path over to the sides . Neural interfaces that are able to demonstrate the potential of what they could do are highly precious because they enable a mech pilot to modulate the parameters with much less effort . Practically speaking, mech pilots that make use of tailored neural interfaces are able to push their mechs to their upper limits without any strain!"

Now that finally caught his attention . If she was telling the truth, then the risks of catastrophic failure wasn't enough for Ves to abort this plan .

"What's the difference between a standard neural interface and a better one? Besides the advantages that you already mentioned . "

"Hm, the foundation of the control scheme of a mech relies on conveying the thoughts of the mech pilots to their mechs . Do you know how difficult that is? Mech cadets need months to get used to the disparity between controlling

their human bodies and operating their mech bodies . A good neural interface is able to shorten this adjustment period until it's nonexistent! This is the difference that good design and access to the best materials could bring to the table . "

"That doesn't entirely answer my question . I get it that better materials allow you to construct a better interface, but what are the factors in the design that provides such a specific improvement . "

Iris smirked at him in an intrigued manner . "What I'm about to say is a little controversial, but here goes . Neural interface developers are able to . . . influence the man-machine connection . There are many dangers involved with this, the Farund Affair being one of the more subtle outcomes, but with careful prodding we're able to push a mech pilot into various patterns of behavior, such as improving their reaction speed or making them more alert to attacks from the rear!"

She was right . This was a massive bombshell to Ves . "Isn't that brainwashing?"

"Every manipulation of the mind is a form of brainwashing . It's a meaningless catch-all term . We'd like to call it influencing . Through our predetermined designs, we're able to influence the set behavior of specific mech pilots into performing actions they normally wouldn't take . Of course, as mech designers we exclusively try to come up with outcomes that will increase the odds of survival . "

"That still doesn't change the fact that you're talking about unwilling manipulation! Do the mech pilots even know that their own neural interface is messing with their minds?"

"We generally abstain from disclosing the truth to regular and advanced mech pilots . Registered neural interface developers like myself received special dispensation from the MTA to withhold the truth . Mech pilots aren't the smartest bunch of people in the galaxy . Telling them the full scope of what our neural interface do will only incite panic and fear . "

"Maybe some of that panic and fear is justified . " Ves retorted . He hadn't completely calmed down from her earlier revelation . "The more I heard about this, the more I'm leaning away towards accepting your teachings . No offense, Iris, but messing with the free will of man and machine deeply abhorrent to me . "

Like hacking mechs, manipulating mech pilots through their neural interface clashed directly against his design philosophy .

Still, despite his reactions, Iris kept smirking at him . It was as if she had encountered plenty of skeptics before .

"Let me in on another secret, boss . You should know that every expert, ace and god pilot receives a tailor-made custom mech, right?"

"Of course . They're worth the investment and they can't express their full abilities without a mech that fits their strengths . "

"A custom neural interface is the key to facilitating resonance! While it's possible to achieve resonance with a standard interface, it's ten times easier with a connection that is already programmed to strengthen the association connected to the resonance phenomenon!"

That meant that every elite mech pilot above the expert level willingly submitted themselves to a benign form of brainwashing!

Ves could not receive anymore shocks for today . He held his heart and felt awfully conflicted . If Iris spoke the truth, what did it mean for his design philosophy . He held a lot of ambitions . He had no doubt that in the future that he would design plenty of elite mechs for experts and aces worthy to receive his assistance .

With the current direction his design philosophy developed towards, Ves would have to accept a handicap if he wanted to design an elite mech!

Time seemed to freeze as his doubts and mental conflicts came to a head . He felt as if he needed to make a clear decision on the spot .