

Chapter 531 Military Mechs

Humans used mechs as war machines. It sounded simple, but in the Age of Mechs, they became ubiquitous. For various reasons, regulations on owning a machine that could wipe out an entire town in a handful of minutes was fairly lax. Anyone decent enough and with the right paperwork could own one.

These days, much more mechs circulated on the market than in the military. Of course, the former couldn't compare to the latter in quality. Nevertheless, when it came to earning money, the private sector was the way to go.

Institutions that taught mech design groomed their students for the private market. Some did a better job than others, but the starting point was always focused on preparing future mech designers to the harsh realities of trying to compete in a cutthroat market.

This inevitably biased his studies and practical experience towards private sector mechs. He learned all about how to market his product and what he needed to pay attention to in order to maximize its sales.

Ves thought that knowing how to design a private sector mech was enough to encompass almost every standard mech variation. No matter how esoteric their design turned out to be, the fundamental goal was to turn a profit.

The battle currently raging a fair distance away from the ships of the task force turned his conception upside-down. Though he already experienced the humongous battles on land and in space at the Glowing Planet campaign, the scale was just too massive for Ves to relate. He also worried about other priorities back then. Now, he realized that he missed a lot of opportunities.

Perhaps because he was invested in the Flagrant Vandals and the Inheritor model, Ves cared a lot more about how mechs actually fought.

Mechs meant for the private market mostly relied on their individual characteristics as their selling points. Their performance, the quality of their materials and the technologies incorporated into them served as the fundamental measuring stick for their ultimate value.

When Ves initially began to take up his new duties with the Flagrant Vandals, he needed to readjust his commercial mindset a little bit. He couldn't help but look at every element of a design and make a mental calculation of their cost and price to performance ratio.

Not every mech designer looked at mechs in this light, especially the careerists. While they certainly needed to deal with budgets and other constraints, they only followed the rules because they'd been told to by their superiors, not because of an individual need to minimize their expenses.

In the end, the military and commercial mech industries differed too much.

The current battle between the fastest Vandal mechs and the Dancer Bat mechs revealed that mech battles revolved around more than just the raw performance of the mechs.

Formations played a significant role as well.

Mechs meant for the private market often ended up in the hands of mercenary corps and company forces. The mech pilots employed by these outfits only had a tenuous grasp on discipline, and their coordination was primitive at best.

Two private sector outfits going at each other resembled more of a street brawl than a proper battle.

Thus, Ves never had a proper introduction in the use of formations up to now.

The Calico Dancer Bats responded with the so-called Hamburger Chaotic Bat Formation. In this formation, the Brain Scramblers took a backseat due to their depleted ammunition, but the swift and agile Pinpricks picked up the slack.

Despite being outnumbered by the enemy, the Dancer Bats largely held on. It looked kind of silly to Ves. He even had a misconception of an oversized meat patty being sandwiched by two overly thin buns. The bread should have broken apart, but in fact they continued to pressure the somewhat constrained hamburger patty.

"Do you see, boss?" Iris noted. As a Vesian rebel, her understanding of the Vesian mech models surpassed his own. She knew the famous mech regiments such as the Calico Dancer Bats like the back of her hand. "The Dancer Bats thrive on chaos. It's what they've made for. Right now, we're losing our Inheritors at a rate to three-to-one."

Certainly, the performance of the Inheritors in this melee was frankly abysmal. The Calico Dancer Bats simply schooled them with the use of a particularly annoying sub-formation called the Batwing Ribbon Cutter.

Half-squads of five Pinpricks formed in a single file and looped around a single target. Each of them roughly followed the same trajectory and fired at the same target in a single instant, which almost always guaranteed a Vandal mech going down.

The Vandals switched up their own formation in response. Thankfully to Ves, the pilots pulled their Inheritors back from their overloaded state now that they didn't have to catch up anymore.

The Vandals employed the so-called Hungry Crow Attack, a formation that resembled the Batwing Ribbon Cutter but had been adjusted for melee mechs.

The Inheritors picked out a single target and dove at it in quick succession. The expectation here was that their target would definitely block or evade the knife attacks of the lead mech.

The second Inheritor followed up on the initial attack and stood a higher chance of inflicting damage. Even then, if their target still managed to get away, it should have certainly become more rattled. If the second Inheritor couldn't leave a mark, the third, fourth or fifth mechs all got their own opportunities.

Like annoying crows pecking at an increasingly feeble body, the Inheritors managed to take out more and more Pinprick mechs.

This tipped the balance in their favor. Even if the Vandals lost more mechs at the start, the Calico Dancer Bats only came with eighty mechs. Each mech that got wrecked weighed much heavier on them because it tilted the balance of power disproportionately to their enemies.

"The Calico Dancer Bats have done a lot of damage, but they're done for now. I'm impressed with their battle grit, but they've bitten off way more than they could chew." Ves guessed. "Their combat carriers are being threatened by our second wave of mechs."

While the Inheritor mechs kept the Pinpricks and Brain Scramblers busy, the Vandals also sent out a second wave of mechs to pursue the combat carriers that carried the Vesian mechs into this star system. Though the Hellcats and other spaceborn mechs of the Vandals couldn't quite catch up to the enemy combat carriers, just chasing it was enough of a threat.

As the battle progressed, Ves saw that the Flagrant Vandals got better at dismantling their opposition. Their early successes boosted their faltering morale and with the numbers growing ever greater in their favor, they began to crush the Calico Dancer Bats in numbers.

Naturally, the Bats didn't take this lightly and started to improve and adjust their tactics and formations. They started to get used to the fighting style of the Vandals and prevented a complete collapse.

Still, as much as both sides suffered, they couldn't let this battle of attrition go on. The Pinpricks simply didn't have the numbers to annihilate the quick and agile Inheritors anymore. In order to take down a single Inheritor, a half-squad needed to use up several magazines each just to strip away the surface armor have a decent shot of hitting something critical.

Thus, as the Calico Dancer Bats declined to about fifty mechs, the previously lackluster Brain Scramblers simultaneously fired shells in the middle of the melee that quickly exploded into massive particle clouds that acted as obscuring smoke.

"The Calico Dancer Bats are pulling back! Both their mechs and combat carriers are overloading their flight systems!"

By letting the Flagrant Vandals close the gap, they let themselves be crushed by overwhelming numbers. The Calico Dancer Bats evidently hadn't been ordered to fight to the death. Their decision to perform a tactical repeat marked the end of the battle.

The Flagrant Vandals won!

"Clean up the battlefield and retrieve of mechs and escape pods. Prioritize speed, I don't want to stick around in this star system longer than we have to. This is just the start. Imodris has more ships on their way."

"Sir, what about the enemy mechs and escape pods?"

"Leave them alone. We don't have the time to recover their mechs and tend to possible prisoners."

The Calico Dancer Bats sincerely fled from the Vandals. As the cleanup and rescue operation went underway. They received no obstruction from their distant opponents.

As for the enemy escape pods, it appeared that Major Verle didn't wish to offend the Dancer Bats. After all, the previous battle was fought in an open and upfront fashion. Although the Vandals lost a fair amount of Inheritors, the Calico Dancer Bats didn't go out of their way to destroy any flying escape pods.

The Vandals held no hard feelings towards the Dancer Bats.

While everyone rejoiced over their minor victory, Ves sighed and pressed his palms over his hand. He could already imagine the mountain load of work that needed to be done after the battle.

Perhaps the Vandals won the engagement by forcing the Dancer Bats to retreat, but they lost quite seriously in terms of mechs and resources.

"Is this what the Calico Dancer Bats are after? They attempted to force a fight not to delay us, but to starve us out?"

This was definitely a devious strategy! Lieutenant Commander Soapstone already told Ves that acquiring more resources was a titanic struggle in the Vesia Kingdom.

Ves gazed obsessively at the projections as they depicted the Vandal mechs retrieving the fallen mechs that hadn't made it to the end of the battle. This helped much to recoup some of their losses, but they still needed lots of supplements to repair most of the internal damage due to their reckless overload.

"I'm going to hate my job tomorrow. There are way too many issues with those Inheritors. Overloading their systems by thirty percent practically aged their mechs by several years.

Letting all of that wear and tear accumulate to such an extent was ruinous! Ves definitely needed to ride his people hard if he wished to get the Inheritors back to full strength.

The brief battle served as the prelude for their escape. The two companies made it off fairly lightly while the Vandals learned a brutal lesson that they still fell short of matching the military prowess of a proper mech regiment.

More importantly, it also taught him that Ves needed to pay attention to more than just the individual performance of a mech. Formations had the potential to leverage the strengths of the mechs that performed them and allowed them to exploit weaknesses they shouldn't have been able to do so by themselves.

"This engagement was rather short but devastating to us." Iris softly said. "Even if we drove them off, we won't be at our best in the following days."

"We'll just have to pull up our sleeves and work a little harder then." Ves replied. He already started to readjust his plans for the future. "The only thing we can't do is solve our resource problems. We're too short on the repairing every Inheritor mech that needs servicing."

Iris didn't have a solution for him, which he already expected. Neither did Ves for that matter. He needed to think the situation through and consult with the staff before he implemented his plans.

With the lives of thousands at stake, Ves couldn't afford to be careful and make unilateral decisions on behalf of himself.

The Vandals limped back inside their hangar bays as the fleet prepared to transition into FTL. The gravitic mines that formed such a nuisance to them had been shot down by the marksmen among them. The retreat of their enemy left them with ample time to aim their shots.

Thirty minutes after the end of the battle, the entire fleet successfully transitioned into FTL. They truly fended off extinction, but only for now. The

next territory was the Venidse Duchy. The Vandals would all face different circumstances there. At the very least, they needed to get their hands on a lot of materials to cover all the reports.

Ves hated his job.

Chapter 532 Chief Elin

Now that the fleet entered into FTL, they didn't have to worry about any enemy attacks for the time being. Each ship could stand down and let the crew relax. Not too much, of course. Plenty of work needed to be done, especially for the mech technicians and mech designers.

Ves frowned at the list of resources the Vandals needed to replenish their losses. The total price tag increased by a third, which signified how many raw materials was required to plug all of the gaps.

"Just a brief skirmish already inflicted so much damage!"

Despite their material losses, the Flagrant Vandals treated it as a win. No matter how skewed their losses turned out to be, they successfully fended off the Calico Dancer Bats and forced them to abort their stalling plans.

Ves knew why the mood was so upbeat. The servicemen really needed a morale booster. Major Verle explicitly ordered everyone smart enough to know the truth to play along with this charade.

He pressed his lips into a line as he wandered across the Shield of Hispania. Everyone acted as if they had become indomitable against all adversity.

To Ves, the Vandals only made it out because of some extreme decisions and the benefit of luck.

If Imodris had been a little more prompt in sending out their reinforcements, the Vandals wouldn't have made it out at all.

Back at his office, Ves worked hours on end to adjust the timetable in response to the heavy damage sustained by the Inheritors. Even mechs that hadn't suffered a single scratch would have sooty smoke emerging from the internals.

"More than two-hundred Inheritors are crippled! This is too much!"

The brief period where the mech pilots pushed the overload from twenty to thirty percent represented a painful spike to the mechs they piloted.

Just as Ves thought he would be handling logistical issues for the entire week, Major Verle suddenly called him up to his office. After entering it, the mech officer immediately brought up a disconcerting topic.

"I'm here to discuss the situation with the Finmoth Regal to you. Our investigators have achieved some preliminary results. Read this first."

The major handed over a data pad to Ves, who quickly scoured through the heavily-summarized report. His expression sunk as he realized how far this rabbit hole descended.

When Ves detected something strange from Nemo McAllister's mech, he traced the suspect work back to a trio of mech technicians aboard the Finmoth Regal. When Ves passed his suspicions to Major Verle, he ordered their arrest.

That was when the bombs exploded. The damage to one of the Regal's hangar bay was already bad enough, but taking out an engine almost forced the task force to leave her behind.

They couldn't afford to lose a combat carrier!

Fortunately, the Finmoth Regal was able to keep up by getting towed long enough for her to regain partial propulsion. She was also able to transition into

FTL without a problem because FTL travel didn't rely on sublight propulsion in the first place.

Now that the immediate crisis had passed, Major Verle ordered an extensive inspection of the Finmoth Regal. From top to bottom, everything shady and dubious got exposed.

The data pad listed various minor infractions such as illegal gambling rings and fight clubs. None of those incidents really mattered too much so the Vandals who participated in these kinds of activities only suffered a slap on the wrist.

The investigators focused more on the serious infractions. A loose string of threats and blackmail eventually led to Chief Technician Michael Elin.

"I see now." Ves uttered with shock and disappointment. "Chief Elin was one of the ringleaders responsible for the embezzlement that we cracked down on. I can't believe he got mixed with traitors."

The three mech technicians who installed the unauthorized modifications in Nemo's mech couldn't be brought to questioning because they all blew themselves up. The investigators tried hard, but they couldn't identify any fellow conspirators. The three had always acted in a low-key manner and made few friends among the crew of the Finmoth Regal. The only person aboard the ship that had a connection to them was the chief that supervised their activities.

As their superior, Chief Elin should have kept a closer eye on what the hidden traitors had been up to. Letting them install unauthorized modifications without a single checkup was a massive act of negligence on the part of the chief.

While chief technicians couldn't possibly ride behind the shoulders of every subordinate, they should at least be diligent enough to check off any completed modifications.

"How did Chief Elin get mixed up with the traitors in the first place?"

"Money, basically." Major Verle sighed and rubbed his tired face. "The treacherous trio got inside his good books and helped him facilitate the embezzlement. They became his left and right arms and did all of the actual work. Through years of pretending to be his dimwitted but loyal henchmen, Chief Elin completely trusted their loyalty."

"Even then, regulations state that chiefs have to double-check everyone's finished work no matter how much they favor them. How did the traitors manage to get the chief off their backs?"

"They took advantage of the embezzlement that Chief Elin was engaged in. It's very simple, Mr. Larkinson. As the mastermind behind this scheme, would the chief want to get caught red-handed trying to manipulate the machines that siphoned away a minute portions of valuable exotics?"

"He would want to stay away as far as he can. In fact, it would be better if Chief Elin exposed himself as little as possible."

The traitors certainly outsmarted the greedy chief who thought nothing about his own benefits. The man whose job was to supervise his underlings completely neglected his fundamental duties.

A chief technician's main job was to direct the mech technicians and stop them from doing any damage! Any other responsibility only served as extras compared to this first demand.

Thus, with the traitors aboard the Finmoth Regal going out with a bang, how could Chief Elin not escape from scrutiny. It took a lot of digging to uncover the hidden files and other shady matters that he had done.

From there, they uncovered a network of over a dozen conspirators, from a security officer that hacked and wiped the ubiquitous monitoring system, to a

cargo handler who smuggled packets of high-value exotics to black market dealers whenever the Finmoth Regal berthed at a space station.

The worst thing about it was that the conspiracy even extended to a low-ranking mech designer called Loke Vedette. The hapless chump had immediately been thrown into the brig.

Major Verle emphasized the breadth and depth of the conspiracy. "Chief Elin's network extended throughout the middle and lower decks of the Finmoth Regal. Through the enticement of profits, he subverted over a dozen pliable Vandals. It's a failure on multiple levels. Chief responsibility for this failure rests on the Regal's chief security officer, but the captain is culpable as well. As for Mr. Vedette, he has not fulfilled the responsibilities that we expect from our mech designers."

In other words, Ves shared some of the blame as well for letting Vedette be pulled into Chief Elin's schemes.

Rather than come up with some excuse that all of this happened prior to being field promoted to head designer, Ves readily accepted the blame. "I have not been thorough enough in my supervision. His failure his my failure."

"Good" Major Verle smiled. "Accepting your faults is the first step to turning this disaster around."

He only acknowledged the blame because he didn't care too much about his current job. As for blame, in actuality Vedette should have been supervised by Bovis Mercator. So when it came to actual blame, Mercator should have shouldered the brunt of it. Ves already planned a way to get back at his rival for this screw-up. He felt a lot of threat from this ambitious careerist.

"Our security department and I will pass judgement over Chief Elin and his fellow conspirators. The punishments will be handed out by myself as well.

While the others have mostly been duped or charmed into participating in Elin's schemes, the chief himself will likely face the ultimate punishment."

Verle didn't need to elaborate on what this punishment entailed. Ves heard enough stories from his aunts and uncles to know that the victim deserved every bit of suffering that they had in store.

If Chief Elin was found guilty of gross negligence and betrayal during an active battle in a time of war, he would get what was known as the Cold Burial or Lonely Trek.

The punishment was known as the cold burial because it was pretty much the opposite to the space burial of the honored dead. While servicemen who fell in the line of duty would be flung into the sun to let his physical manifestation experience a rebirth, no such privilege would be granted to traitors.

Chief Elin would pretty much be pushed inside an aircar-sized coffin and be locked with some loose restraints. The coffin would have a miniature life-support system that provided the former chief with a complete circulation of nutrient packs, water and oxygen. Naturally, the waste management system would recycle the waste products and blend them with cultivated organics to produce another batch of nutrient packs.

Basically, the coffin was a tiny prison where a human would theoretically be able to live out their natural lifespan. It cost a fair bit of resources to fabricate such a meticulous self-enclosed ecosystem, but the Bright Republic definitely had the technology to realize such a thing.

However, it was called a coffin and not a prison for a very good reason. Besides these basic amenities, the coffin held nothing else. No distractions, no connections to any networks, not even a shower.

On top of that, the coffin would be operated by an AI whose sole job was to keep the occupant alive as long as possible. The AI insured the prisoner kept

being fed and watered while preventing them from committing suicide. To accomplish this, robust robotic arms would be affixed to the insides of the coffin. Like any other component of the coffin, these arms could not be broken by any human force and was meticulously built to last for centuries.

Any human occupant would die long before the coffin succumbed to time.

This cruel punishment where the occupant suffered an endless, lonely trek in the dark of interstellar space was one of the cruelest punishments that the Mech Corps could give out. Personally, Ves thought Major Verle was being a bit excessive by hinting at this punishment.

He much preferred a straightforward execution to end this matter quickly.

"Why did you tell me this, sir? While I'm not a lawyer, I don't think it's entirely appropriate for you to talk about Chief Elin's punishment before his formal trial."

"In this task force, I set the laws." Verle boldly stated. The man practically glowed when he said that. "Trial or not, Chief Elin's fate is sealed. In our flight from the Kingdom, we can't afford too many mistakes. Any treachery or acts of negligence puts us further and further away from crossing the borders. An example must be made. The slack that we've given the Vandals during peacetime was a mistake. This is the strongest message I can give that any further failures will not be tolerated."

Ves inched a little backward in fright. The mech officer was being really intense right now! "Ah, I understand. You want to kill the chicken to scare the monkeys. That's a good idea, sir. Maybe the rest of the Vandals that are scheming against our mech regiment will think twice."

"I'm not so optimistic about that. Vandals will be Vandals. Obedience is not in our DNA. There will always be incidents. The key is to encourage my men to

tone them down. At the very least, outright treachery and negligence that leads to deaths must not occur again under my watch."

The man shouldered the responsibility of shepherding the task force safely across the borders and reach the promised land of the Reinald Republic. The pressure he faced was immense, so Ves somewhat sympathized with the mech officer.

"One more thing, Mr. Larkinson."

"Yes, sir?"

"You are responsible for building Chief Elin's coffin. Do it in person. Make it durable and make it last."

Chapter 533 Cold Burial

The Flagrant Vandals used the next few days in FTL travel to pick up the pieces from the previous skirmish. Despite the relatively short and brief engagement, the fight resulted in a lot of material damage.

Fortunately, a lot of mech pilots escaped their crumbling mechs by ejecting in time. Though the task force had lost a fair amount of precious mechs, they could at least rebuild those in time. It was much harder to recruit and train loyal mech pilots. They represented the foundation of a mech regiment.

Ves spent a fair amount of time delegating the repair work. The Vandals recovered many Inheritor wrecks. Some came in incomplete pieces, and ordinarily Ves would have chosen to discard them, but in this time of scarcity they had no choice but to make the best out of what they gathered.

Thus, he formed plans to piece together and repair each Inheritor with minimum resource demands. He tried to puzzle together compatible pieces as best he could and rely on fabricating replacement parts as little as possible.

The repair work became highly complicated due to the inability of the ships in the fleet to exchange parts and resources with each other. They needed to

wait until they transitioned out of FTL before they could perform all the queued transfer requests.

Carletta Haine, the chief technician aboard the Shield of Hispania, provided Ves with her own perspective when he dropped by the hangar bays for a visit.

"Kid, this ain't nothing yet. Back when I was a snot-nosed techie in the previous war, I've seen respectable mech companies descend into rags after they barely survived an extended pursuit. It's not the big battles that breaks their spirit, but rather the little fights here and there. Every battle saps their willpower and resources, and without any chance of replenishing both, they continued to fracture."

Ves frowned at her words. "Do you think we'll suffer through the same kind of ordeal?"

"I'm counting on it. Our mission is ten times harder than anything else like it. We're literally in the heart of the Vesia Kingdom. Do you expect us to breeze past the Vesians as if they're blind? Even if we are taking advantage of rebel help, the most they can do is pull off some tricks. We're essentially on our own here."

He didn't wish to argue this point, having heard it many times before, so he quickly changed topics.

"What do you think about Chief Elin's trial?"

"Ptuh!" The burly female chief spat. A cleaning bot quickly zipped close and cleaned up her mess. "I always knew he couldn't get his hands clean. It's no secret that some of us take liberties now and then, but as long as it isn't worth more than a few hundred credits, every chief wouldn't look too closely. That is until your new resource management system arrived."

"We need to save every milligram of materials that we can if we want to survive this gauntlet." Ves nodded in tacit acknowledgement to her implied

words. "Fun times are over now. I believe that Alloc would choose to do the same if he was in my shoes."

"Mr. Brandstad is a decent man and a damn good mech designer! Chief Elin is the exact opposite! That man saw the Finmoth Regal as his own little kingdom. Nothing about mechs aboard that combat carrier escaped his sight. He was the Regal's own little shadow captain."

"Wow, if you knew about all that, why didn't you report it?"

Chief Haine looked at Ves as if he was stupid. "You're way too fresh to understand. Suffice to say, I'm glad that stain is gone. I can't wait to see him drift into space!"

Ves wanted to point out the fact that the trial hadn't come to a verdict yet, but he knew in his heart that the man's fate was sealed. Major Verle made his opinions on the trial very clear, and combined with the evidence collected over the course of a few days, a guilty verdict was practically guaranteed.

The reason why he left the office was to prepare the means of Chief Elin's slow execution. After waving goodbye to Chief Haine, Ves entered one of the Shield of Hispania's machine shop that normally fabricated ship components and utilized it to build up the cold coffin.

A cold burial happened enough times for the Mech Corps to maintain a standardized blueprint in its central database. They even came in many variants. The cheapest ones would crumble after being hit by a small piece of space junk, while others would bounce off and continue to go down their merry way in deep space.

Ves had been ordered to make a robust coffin, so he opted for a middle quality design that ticked all the boxes. Going for something more extravagant and expensive was a massive waste of time and resources.

He felt strange as he fabricated the coffin part by part. His personal involvement in building something which would be someone's grave forced him to reflect on his decisions as head designer.

He felt a little responsible for the mess that happened on the Finmoth Regal. "If I didn't caught the anomalies and pointed them out to Major Verle, maybe all of those deaths could have been prevented."

If he saved his suspicions until the battle was over, perhaps the Finmoth Regal's security department could have tackled the issue with more finesse.

Still, the situation back then demanded an immediate response. The two suspect Inheritor mechs had replaced their ejection systems with hidden transmitters that sent out who-knew-what to the Vesians. By tackling the transmitters the moment they detected them, the Vandals might have avoided greater calamity.

Ves did not feel guilty for reporting the issue. He only felt as if he could have done something more before the battle erupted.

"Since Chief Elin is one of the most prolific embezzlers, I should have done something more than wash my hands of the past."

He could have talked to Elin or check up on his past actions. Now, it was too late to remedy his mistakes. While Chief Elin didn't fall under his chain of command, he did hold some responsibilities for the low-ranking mech designer that Elin co-opted in his schemes.

Ves hadn't decided on what to do yet with Loke Vedette. The young mech designer that had been conscripted into the Mech Corps had been too impressionable against Chief Elin's devilish charisma.

Still, even if Vedette lacked a lot of experience, a mech designer should have never subordinated himself to a chief. A proper working relationship should have been the other way around.

For now, Vedette stewed in the Finmoth Regal's brig. Unlike most of his compatriots, he was fortunate enough to escape the fate of a court-martial. All in all, his involvement was very marginal so Ves had been tasked to carry out his judgement.

It didn't take more than a day to finish fabricating the coffin. It looked more like an oversized ball if nothing else. Built with pure metallic alloys and little else, it contained the bare necessities to form a functional coffin for the living. The shackles that restricted the victim was sturdy enough to resist fatigue and the passage of time, while the life support systems incorporated enough redundancies to keep it working even if thirty percent of its components stopped working.

Anyone who got thrown in this coffin would certainly live up the rest of their lifespan in existential agony. Ves made sure of that by fabricating it to the best of his ability.

The Vandals put it to the test the instant they emerged out of FTL in some nameless Venidse star system. Fortunately, the system was barren from any Vesian presence, so they had the luxury to rest their ships and transfer resources.

Ves boarded a shuttle carrying Major Verle and several other officers to the Finmoth Regal. Once they arrived at the combat carrier, they carried out another burial ceremony for the few mech pilots and ship crew that lost their lives during the previous skirmish.

Just like last time, many Vandals throughout the task force attended the ceremony through their virtual avatars. Major Verle kept his words fairly brief, and the coffins had all been launched towards the Vesian sun.

"Now that we have sent off our honored dead, it is time for someone else to receive the fate that he deserves."

A floater platform carried forth the hefty cold coffin that Ves had fabricated. At the sight of the familiar object, every Vandal began to scowl or frown. They knew what it meant, and they knew who was about to be buried inside.

A pair of security officers dragged forth a heavily restrained prisoner to the coffin. Chief Elin's court-martial had been broadcasted throughout the fleet yesterday, where he hardly stood a chance against the overwhelming array of evidence against him. With Major Verle bent on setting an example, the former chief was destined for the coffin in the very next day.

"MMmhhmmhmm! Mmhhmmhmmm!"

Elin's bloodshot eyes looked frantic as he tried to speak around the gag that kept his mouth shut. Maybe he wanted to profess his innocence. Maybe he wanted to curse the brass. Maybe he wanted to drag his comrades down with him. Nobody moved to take away his gag, because the words of the traitor was not worth listening.

Ves happened to sit besides Loke Vedette. He took the mech designer that had been duped by Chief Elin out of the brig so that he could witness the ultimate fate of someone who's negligence had led to deaths.

"Look closely Vedette. This is the chief you thought who knew how to do your job better. I hope you learn not to lean on others too much for guidance next time."

"Y-Y-Yes sir!"

The two hardly differed in age. Both of them had not yet reached their thirties. Yet their wide gulf in status and capability separated them at different heights. Ves constantly improved and had a bright future ahead of himself, while Vedette was someone who failed to make a name of himself after graduating as a mech designer.

Thus, Ves had no compunctions in treating Vedette as a junior. He even felt a lot of pity for Vedette, to the point of giving him a slap on the wrist.

In any case, the task force was short on mech designers. They couldn't afford to throw capable help in the brig where they would rot for the duration of this mission.

In any case, Ves looked pleased at Vedette's outward reverence towards him. It made him feel powerful and put him in a good mood. He resolved to keep an eye on the young man and see whether he could grow from this potentially career-ending ordeal.

The final ritual almost came to an end. Major Verle stepped down from the podium and approached the well-made coffin. "Mr. Michael Elin, as the former chief technician aboard the Finmoth Regal, you have betrayed your oaths and your fellow Vandals in the naked pursuit for profit. Yesterday, you have been found guilty to every charge laid on your foot. Frankly, it disgusts me to be on the same deck as you."

Some of the more unruly Vandals broke the solemn silence by jeering at the gagged and frantic chief. Even now, Elin tried to weasel his way out of his macabre fate.

"We treated you as a comrade and a brother. When every other mech regiment rejected to take you on, we welcomed you with open arms. Whatever transgressions you had done in the past was irrelevant in our eyes. However, that does not mean that our ability to forget extends to the present time."

The major's eyes hardened as his full weight as a mech officer bore down on the former chief. Elin shied away at the intensity of Verle's stare.

"Out of everyone involved in this conspiracy, nobody is more culpable than you. There is no forgiveness for scum like you. Not even a quick death will

suffice to atone for the damage you have done to us. I hope you will find some absolution in your endless trek into space."

Elin jerked his shackled body like his life depended on it, but the restraints and the grip of the security officers kept him firmly under control. The cold coffin's hatch opened up, allowing the security officers to haul their prisoner inside and affix him to the restraints of the interior of the coffin.

By all intents and purposes, it was a perpetual cell which would keep Elin locked without any chance of escape. Freedom from captivity and life would never grace the guilty chief until his natural lifespan ran out.

The Finmoth Regal turned around and oriented her hangar bay away from the sun and directly into deep space. With a soft anti-grav push, the hefty cold coffin began its Lonely Trek across the galaxy.

The Cold Burial came at an end.

Chapter 534 Leadership Lesson

The Vandals moved on quickly after the two separate burial ceremonies. Ves noticed that the Vandals had become much more honest and subdued after witnessing Chief Elin's gruesome fate.

Before he took the shuttle back to the Shield of Hispania, Ves stayed behind on the Finmoth Regal for a few hours to take a brief round of inspection. As the head designer, Ves had access to all of the hangar bays, mech stables and mech workshops.

Vedette walked behind Ves in a subdued fashion as they took in the state of the maintenance department aboard the Finmoth Regal.

Ves took in the lethargic expressions of the mech technicians. All of them suffered badly from the revelation that Chief Elin and some of their colleagues dabbled in treachery. To the Vandals, betraying their fellow brothers and sisters in arms was the worst crime imaginable.

Even if the entire galaxy turned against the Flagrant Vandals, their bonds would never break!

"Take a look at these mech technicians at work, Mr. Vedette. What do you see?"

"Uhhh.. they're not working as hard as before. Chief Elin used to be our ultimate boss. Without his presence, no one knows what to do."

"This is the consequence of your missteps." Ves bluntly said. "What is this section supposed to do?"

"They're tasked with dismantling a partially-damaged the Inheritor."

"Why are they slacking off?"

The junior mech designer's mouth gaped like a fish. Ves really wanted to smack the young man's face for his indecisiveness.

"Remember who you are! You're a mech designer, not a mech technician! These men and women should listen to you, especially now that they are devoid of a chief!"

"B-B-But I'm too new at this!"

"Your brains are ten times larger than all of theirs put together. Go out there and get those mech technicians back to work!"

Ves gently pushed Vedette's back. Due to his enhanced body, this turned out to be a hefty push that caused the junior to stumble straight into the mech technicians.

"Eh? Watch where you are going!"

"Hey, it's Vedette!"

The mech designer regained his balance and tried to speak at the mech technicians. "Guys, please go back to work. We're way behind schedule, so please disassemble this mech."

The mech technicians laughed as if a little boy told them to scram.

"It's our break time right now! We need our rest. Do you expect us to work around the clock? We'll fall apart if we can't enjoy some peace!"

"Get lost Vedette! Chief Elin isn't here anymore, so go grovel to someone else!"

"This ain't a place for you to hang around. Go back to your office and let us grease monkeys stew in the muck!"

Just around the corner, Ves palmed his face. Vedette's lack of spine reminded Ves of that Vesian mech designer he met back in the outskirts of Neron City. Ves already forgot the name of that Novice, but the sheer lack of courage both men shared meant that neither of them had much of a future in the mech industry.

Normally, Ves didn't care too much whether another mech designer possessed the grit needed to make something out of their mech design careers, but Vedette happened to be one of his subordinates. Even if he lacked any promise, Ves had a duty to do something about this sad state of affairs. The Finmoth Regal's maintenance department couldn't afford to proceed without any direction.

Ves stepped around the corner and slowly strode forward. He carefully composed his face and unconsciously channeled some of his inner steel.

The entire compartment experienced a drastic change in atmosphere. It wasn't anything a sensor could measure, but when Ves stepped into view, the mech technicians instantly lost their jovialness.

"Ah, Head Designer Larkinson! Fancy seeing you here!"

All eight mech technicians stood at attention as if they faced Major Verle himself. In truth, Ves merely imitated the air of command that the mech officer projected so well during his speeches.

Inwardly, he nodded in satisfaction. Learning from the best may not always be the most appropriate course of action, but it always guaranteed a measure of success. He was satisfied enough with what he achieved.

"You mentioned your former chief back then. As I recall, we just chunked him out into the wrong direction of space. Do you know why we sent him out?"

"Uhhh.. because he was a traitor?"

"WRONG!" Ves barked, which instantly caused the mech technicians to shrink back. Unfortunately, Vedette reacted the strongest against his eruption. "Chief Elin was a piece of work, alright, and he was charged with many crimes. However, his most principle failure was his enormous negligence on the job! To put it into terms your tiny brains can understand, he failed to do his job!"

Everyone's eyes widened. Though they understood the gravity of Chief Elin's failings, they only treated it as something that had nothing to do with them. Certainly, they missed their former chief who acted as a firm but reliable supervisor to them, but they did not connect his failings to their own.

Ves shook them from that idea. "The entire reason Major Verle reserved the punishment of the Lonely Trek to your former chief is because his tolerance for such failings is at an end. Now, look at yourselves. Disassembling this damaged mech will take at least an entire shift if you don't want to aggravate the damage. Looking at the time, and a third of your shift has already gone by. Do you think you can afford to slack off with two-thirds of your shift left to go?"

"No, sir! Sorry, sir, we'll get right back to work!"

"Then do so! I'll be keeping an eye on your work. If I don't see this mech disassembled at the end of the shift, I'll make sure you'll regret it!"

The mech technicians picked up their tools and scampered around the damaged Inheritors as if hyperactive demons possessed their bodies.

Vedette witnessed the entire exchange with wide eyes and a gaping mouth. The man trudged after Ves like a zombie after the latter gestured him forward and moved out of earshot from the mech technicians.

"Did you see how it's done?"

"You're the head designer, sir." Vedette whined. "I can't hope to match your authority!"

This time, Ves couldn't resist his urges. He lightly smacked Vedette's cheek, causing the man to yelp in an annoyingly girly fashion.

"Authority or not, you're a mech designer! Have some pride in our profession!"

In the natural order of the galaxy, a mech technician stood in the lowest rung and followed the instructions of a chief technician. In turn, these chiefs received their instructions from a mech designer.

Even with the temporary absence of a chief, a mech designer should still be able to command a bunch of mech technicians.

Ves had been in the trenches himself a few times during the Groening Mission and the Glowing Planet campaign. Taking charge of mech technicians should have been an essential skill to every mech designer.

A bit helplessly, Ves had to spoonfeed some methods for Vedette to command authority and force the mech technicians to listen to his orders.

"The Vandals will need some time to sort out the hierarchy. Last I heard, Major Verle isn't too happy with Chief Elin's deputies. All but one turned out to be his accomplices, and the remaining chump lacks the qualities we expect

from a chief. Therefore, it's likely that a trustworthy deputy from another ship will be transferred to the Finmoth Regal to assume his duties as your new chief technicians."

Vedette appeared relieved at the news, which was exactly the wrong response to make in front of Ves.

"Don't think you can slack off as well once the new chief takes charge! Your responsibilities are still the same whether a chief is present or not! Keep watch over the mech technicians and help them solve any complicated problems that might come up, but don't forget to maintain their productivity at the highest level possible!"

"Ah, I'll try my best, sir!"

"Trying is not enough. Confidence comes from belief in yourself. Every mech designer ought to be confident in the superiority of their knowledge. If there is any crutch you need to lean on, then lean on that if nothing else."

"I'll take that under advisement, sir!"

After performing his deed for the day, Ves left Vedette to figure things out on his own and boarded a shuttle that brought him back to the Shield of Hispania.

In truth, while Ves could have propped up the junior, he wasn't strictly obligated to provide so much guidance. Still, Ves took up some of his valuable time to guide Vedette to the right path because he wanted to practice his ability to teach.

"It also helps to make a connection with Mr. Vedette."

Ves didn't have much hope that Vedette would amount to anything, but he never ruled out the possibility. If Mr. Vedette turned out to be a gem in the rough, then Ves would be glad to have the foresight to lay down a connection at a premature stage.

He wanted to build more bridges like this with other mech designers, but it was impossible for him to waste so much time by interacting with so many subordinates.

Another reason why he interacted with people this way was to borrow position as head designer to temper his leadership abilities. Back when he founded and expanded the Living Mech Company, he relied too much on readily-available retainers from the Larkinson Family to do all of the heavy lifting.

Their competence satisfied the needs of his company, so Ves had nothing to complain with the help provided by the Family. The presence of Jake and Chief Cyril lifted a load off his shoulders and freed him from the trifles of managing the company and his subordinates. This left him free to pursue his primary passion, which was to work on designing better mechs.

Thinking back on that period of rapid growth, Ves recently started to doubt whether he made the right decision. "It's hard to hire competent and trustworthy help."

Sometimes, he believed these qualities to be mutually exclusive. Either he could hire someone trustworthy like Carlos that wasn't very good at his job, or he could hire a seasoned veteran like Chief Cyril who was highly capable and practical but also deferential to Ves. Yet the chief's lingering ties to the Family made Ves question sometimes whether he would ultimately listen to those who had nurtured him for decades.

There were even times when his paranoia spiked to the point where he became disillusioned to the company that he founded on his own. Much of what the LMC did was seemingly out of his grasp. He could hardly wrap his mind around the scope of their strategies and activities.

His temporary promotion to head designer shone a light through the fog that had slowly accumulated in his mind. His doubts about leadership began to

fade as he tackled his new responsibilities with a motivation to learn as much as possible.

It was like a second start to Ves. Already, he learned an important lesson. "Nurturing subordinates who are both competent and trustworthy takes time. There aren't any shortcuts to growing my own following. Not if I want to do it properly."

He already resolved to invest in any promising seeds he could find. Ves owed the Flagrant Vandals his gratitude for pushing him into a leadership position, however brief it might last. As head designer, Ves believed he could start to learn how to exert leadership properly instead of outsourcing it to someone else.

"Some responsibilities shouldn't be shifted to others. It's best if I learn how to perform them on my own. Otherwise, who is actually the one in charge?"

Ves had plenty of items on the agenda to flex his leadership muscles. From dealing with the fallout of the skirmish to reprimanding Mercator for dropping the ball on Vedette, Ves faced an endless tide of problems that require the Vandals to do their best if they wanted to escape from being engulfed.

Chapter 535 Tutoring

They spent a decent time skulking about in Venidse space. As one of the larger territories of the Vesia Kingdom, its vast space offered the Flagrant Vandals lots of desolate star systems to hide. For now, they hadn't seen hair nor hide of Venidse patrols.

There was a very good reason for that according to Iris.

"Do you think Venidse can become a worthy rival to Imodris without effort?" She began. "Imodris is closer to the core than Venidse. In addition, it jointly operates a strategically important port system. While the amount of wealth that flows through their hands can't match the trade that goes on in your

famous Bentheim system, neither does the government siphon vast majority of wealth to subsidize the rest of the state."

Bentheim's wealth distribution was a fact of life to the Bright Republic. Otherwise, the Bentheim Liberation Movement wouldn't have grown so powerful and pervasive.

"So Venidse has to do something to match their rival in strength, then. You said that it's relatively well-endowed with resources. Is that enough to offset the trade that's captured by Imodris?"

"That's the complication. It's true that Venidse encompasses a lot of resource-rich star systems, but it takes a significant amount of labor and capital to extract them. That means people, equipment and bots."

Ves started to get an inkling of what she wanted to say. "The latter two is expensive, and relying too much on machines opens up a lot of vulnerabilities. So they have to rely a lot on labor as well."

"Living in Venidse isn't very charming. Aside from a couple of model planets, most of their planets are low-class hives where human lives are treated as valuable as cattle."

When he was young, the Bright Republic often showed how life in the Kingdom was awful for the lower classes. Their poorest had to toil in dangerous mines or spend endless hours supervising bots that did the exact same thing over and over again on the off-chance it glitched or caught a virus.

He recalled the city of Haston on Bentheim. That place was a concentration of the poorest on Bentheim and was a hotbed of BLM sympathy.

If Haston's circumstances magnified into entire planets, then Venidse's rebel group should be as powerful if not more than the BLM!

"The Venidse Liberators is one of the largest and most influential rebel movement in the Kingdom. Though they aren't particularly good at anything, they have access to a fair amount of resources and they are extremely numerous."

Ves paid a lot of attention to the fact that the VL accumulated a lot of resources. Perhaps that was why Major Verle chose to raid one of their facilities and trade with the rebel group during their passage through the territory.

"How powerful is Venidse's military?"

"Very powerful. Very numerous. I already told you about their mech doctrine. Since they have a lot of fingers in the resource extraction sector, they have the enviable ability to obtain much of their materials at near-cost price. This means they can fabricate more mechs at the same cost, which eventually accumulates into fielding more mech legions than any other territory."

"I see. It makes sense. A preference for attrition warfare can only be sustained if you have enough mechs to throw at the enemy." Ves said contemplatively.

"However, most of their numbers advantage is negated by the existence of the VL. The rebels have caused so much trouble over the decades that most of Venidse's military is burdened with guarding population centers, industries, mines and important installations. While that doesn't give us carte blanche to saunter in Vendise's space, we at least don't have to fight Venidse's troops every step of the way."

When Ves attended meetings with Major Verle and his staff, they all echoed the same refrain. Despite the might of Venidse's mech legions, they treated it as an opportunity to bounce back. The only point they argued about was deciding on which star system to raid.

Attacking a prosperous star system would go a long way in reducing their resource deficits. Attacking a less prominent planet came with a lot less risk as they didn't have to face any significant defenses.

Whatever the case, the Vandals only had enough time to attack a single star system. Attacking two systems at a time would delay their schedule and make them miss the two-month deadline.

Ves mostly stayed silent on this topic during the heated discussions in the conference room. He only provided some advice on which star system held the resources they needed and would be worthwhile to raid.

Up to now, Major Verle still hadn't made up his mind.

Besides taking part in those deadlocked discussions, Ves also began to make good on his promises by teaching the mech designers who worked hard enough to win a carrot. Predictably, most opted to borrow a valuable textbook from the central database, but one person happened to request personal tutelage.

"When I heard you wanted me to teach you, I was surprised." Ves said to Pierce over the projection. "If you wanted me to give you a few pointers, I would have given it for free."

Pierce shook his head. "I have my own pride, and I don't want to take advantage of you. Knowledge that comes free is not as sweet as knowledge that I've earned through my own efforts. My time learning the craft from my father has taught me that. I'm not as talented as you. I need to work for it. Otherwise, the knowledge won't stick."

Ves hadn't paid much attention to Pierce the past few days. They traveled on different ships, which made it inconvenient to chat with each other. In addition, Ves spent most of his time with Iris lately. The rebel-aligned mech designer

was an attentive conversation partner who patiently brought him up to speed with regards to the Kingdom.

That said, he should have kept more in touch with Pierce. The Coalition-born mech designer had been assigned to the Beggar's Bounty, one of the two logistics ships of the task force. This was an important posting as Pierce had access to vastly more resources and facilities than anyone else. Though that made his work more complex, the man nonetheless persevered and exceeded his weekly quota.

Ves admired such dedication from his acquaintance, especially since he knew that Pierce was a rather mediocre mech designer.

His background as a mech designer from the Friday Coalition also held some promise. Though Ves did not need to establish any ties with his father, just his citizenship was valuable enough to open some doors that would be closed to a foreigner like Ves.

This was why Ves immediately changed his stance towards Pierce and beheld him with a bit more care.

"Well, you've earned the privilege of receiving my teachings fair and square. You'll get a full hour from me, which should be enough to solve most of your bottlenecks and burning questions. Don't waste it. While I'm proficient with most of the fundamentals, I happen to excel in Physics and lasers. So ask your questions."

Pierce dove into the questioning with glee. He started out with basic but tricky questions on multiple fields, and when he found out that Ves answered his questions without any effort, his questions began to encompass more and more complexity.

To Ves, answering the questions forced him to be thoughtful. As an Apprentice Mech Designer, Pierce wasn't stupid, and he didn't ask any stupid

questions. Though the level of his questions didn't exceed the Journeyman-level, he nonetheless tread into territory that even Ves would pause at. All he could do was to use his superior Intelligence and Skills to churn out an answer on the spot.

At the end of the tutoring session, Pierce quickly excused himself from the call to digest the answers he received. Ves was left alone in his office to stew over the teaching session. Surprisingly, he enjoyed flexing his brain in this manner. There was something enjoyable about guiding a junior into understanding the problems that perplexed him for months or years.

"Heh." He chuckled. "Maybe I'll be a professor someday."

While he didn't feel too strongly about becoming a full-time teacher, he figured he could still treat it like a side activity. A lot of Journeymen and Seniors who owned successful businesses diverted some of their valuable time to teach at various universities and institutions. Obviously, they gained a lot of benefits for doing so. Since Ves happened to enjoy the act of teaching, he seriously started considering whether he should take a teaching position in the future.

"No one hires an Apprentice to teach at an institution. It's too soon for Journeymen to pass on their knowledge. I'll have to advance to Senior before I can become a respectable professor."

That would be a very long time away. Ves did not dare to predict when he would be able to advance to such an exalted rank, but it should at least be several decades away. Even with the help of the System, Ves did not belittle the difficulties involved with advancing past the vast majority of his peers. It wasn't easy to become a Journeyman, let alone a Senior.

"That is something to consider after this damned war is over. Right now, I've got to get back to work."

After the brief tutoring session, Ves returned to his duties. He checked with the mech technicians and made sure they didn't slack off on the job. He corresponded with his deputies and made sure they did the same. He liaised with Lieutenant Commander Soapstone and begged her to tap more into the task force's material reserves. He listened to the staff trying to argue which star system they should raid.

He also planned and supervised the repairs of the Inheritors. The good thing about the damaged Inheritors was that the skirmish with the Calico Dancer Bats didn't lead to a lot of material losses. Most of the damage the Inheritors sustained turned out to be self-inflicted as the lengthy twenty percent overload combined with the thirty percent spike led to a lot of internal disarray.

This meant that cables got fried or melted and circuits got heat-blasted. While that sounded bad and time-consuming to repair, Ves vastly preferred this type of internal damage because the Inheritors hadn't lost any materials. Fried components could easily be recycled and be used to fabricate new components.

The only issue was that it took a lot of time to effect the repairs. The damage ran throughout the entire interior of the frame, so every overloaded Inheritor mech pretty much required a complete disassembly. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to repair or replace the innermost parts which happened to be the most vital ones that ensured the continued operation of the mechs.

All of this took time, too much time for them to adhere to the original timetable. Ves had to go back to the original planning and scrap some of the procedures he had in store just to make room for the unexpected repair work.

Naturally, the Inheritors that sustained actual battle damage required a bit more effort to bring them back into working capacity. The worst wrecks they retrieved from the battlefield were woefully incomplete or had been riddled

with holes. To bring these Inheritors back online, the mech technicians demanded a lot of resources.

They didn't have enough to go around.

"We really need more resources, and they have to be the right ones as well."

The task force still carried valuable exotics and other materials in their cargo holds. Major Verle hoped to hold on to them until they reached a market system where they could dispose of their ill-gotten goods at fair market prices. Trading them away at this point wouldn't help the Vandals reduce their debt burden.

It was obvious that if the Major Verle didn't wish to give away their wealth to unscrupulous rebel traders, they urgently needed to get their needed supplies through another method.

After several days of uncertainty and procrastination, they finally decided on which star system they wanted to raid.

Chapter 536 Premonition

The Shield of Hispania's conference room hosted a lot of contentious meetings lately. Ship captains, mech officers and staff officers all congregated in a single room to decide on which Venidse star system they should descend upon.

Everyone had their ideas. The hawks, which predominantly consisted of mech officers, wanted to raid a resource-rich system. Of course, they didn't aim their sights to systems comparable to the Detemen System. They couldn't afford to get bogged down by several hundred mechs.

The hawks picked out a number of targets that seemed very ambitious to Ves. Even if the Vandals rolled over the opposition, they would still pay a significant price.

The risk-averse crowd that comprised of other mech officers and the majority of the staff officers advocated for caution. The fleet was running low on certain resources, and they weren't at their best. Attacking a smaller, safer target should be the way to go.

These two groups had been at loggerheads for days. Ves watched on as the majority swung back and forth, all the while Major Verle showed uncharacteristic indecisiveness.

Ves was about Verle's stance. Throughout all of their time together, his impressions of the grizzled veteran had been as a staunch leader and a ruthless decision maker that wouldn't hesitate to take the most expedient course of action.

For him to withhold his decision at this junction puzzled Ves a little bit. Did he truly hesitate on his decision right now, or did he wish for the argument to play out?

His instincts believed that it must have been a deliberate choice. Ves mostly sat in the sidelines, so he could look at the entire situation with some detachment. Looking at the various officers attending the meetings via their projections while arguing passionately about their opinions, perhaps it all served as one giant distraction.

Every leader in the task force focused their energies into deciding which star system to raid. Some spent hours in research and preparation to present the most compelling arguments on why their targeted star systems was the most suitable ones to attack.

The momentous discussion distracted them from the misfortune they suffered in the past. Rather than allowing them to dwell at their failings, Verle sneakily used the meetings to direct his most important subordinates into thinking about their next steps forward.

Ves would have applauded the shrewd commanding officer if he wasn't afraid of giving the game away. He felt as if he constantly absorbed new tricks by staying in Major Verle's vicinity.

Eventually, the game had to come to an end. After yet another exhausting back-and-forth, Verle abruptly stood to announce his decision.

"We shall change course towards the Hachew System."

As expected, Major Verle chose to settle on a compromise. His answers didn't satisfy any of the participants, but it hadn't snubbed anyone either. An awkward atmosphere descended as everyone came to grips with the decision.

"The Hachew System isn't as well-defended as prosperous systems, but neither is it barren to the point of calling it a rural system. It hosts a moderate military presence and a handful of mines. Its value is nothing special, but it happens to extract some of the materials we are desperately short on. This should be sufficient to replenish some of our scarcity."

Ves quietly nodded as he read through the basic details of the Hachew System from the panel projected in the middle of the conference table. While it wouldn't enrich the Vandals and allow them to gain more trade goods for them to exchange for what they needed from the rebels, it did happen to contain some of the ores and materials that was vital in repairing and strengthening the Inheritor mechs.

The Hachew System actually looked like a destination that Ves would recommend himself if he didn't wish to refrain from taking part in the internal politics of the Flagrant Vandals.

"Prepare for battle. The Hachew System isn't very far away. Make sure our mechs are ready to deploy with as much strength as they can muster."

The task force had been drifting deeper into Venidse. It wouldn't take too much of a course change to reach the Hachew System. This told Ves that the

entire show had been premeditated from the start. Major Verle already had a destination in mind before they even crossed into Venidse space!

Ves could tell that some of the other Vandals came to the same realization. However, they only amounted to twenty percent of the participants at most.

After the meeting came at an end, every projection winked out while those who were physically present left the compartment.

"Mr. Larkinson."

"Ah, yes sir?"

Major Verle walked up to him and asked an important question. "The next raid will require both spaceborn and landbound mechs. Can we field a sufficient amount of both at this stage?"

"Our spaceborn mech contingent requires more time to get back up to full strength. I'm sorry, but it will take at least two weeks to recover the majority of the Inheritors that sustained internal damage. The material damage was light but very comprehensive, so we have to rebuild them from the ground up. This is a necessary but time-consuming process. Even if you exhort my mech designers to work faster, it's unrealistic to expect them to be up and running in time for the Hachew raid."

The major furrowed his brows. "I did not anticipate the damage has reached such an extent. This isn't the first time we've overloaded the Inheritors. Every time, they bounced back fairly swiftly."

"I know, sir. I've browsed the archives. This is different, though. Previously, we had access to the Wolf Mother, which is an ad-hoc but fully functional factory ship. The production lines aboard that ship is capable of mass-producing an enormous amount of mech parts as long as we can feed enough materials into them. That's not possible now that we split up the main fleet. The two

logistics ships our task force has retained can only do a fraction of the work of a factory ship."

To put it simply, the Verle Task Force got the short end of the stick when it came to the split. The Wolf Mother, Colonel Lowenfield, Major Verle and two of their remaining Journeyman Mech Designers had all been retained by the diminished main fleet that was on their way back to Republic space.

"Our landbound mechs?"

"They require a lot of repairs as well. We've never had the time to recover all of the damage our landbound mechs sustained in the Detemen Operation. It's been something of a low priority for us. According to our original schedule, we should have shifted more workers towards repairing the landbound mechs after crossing into Venidse. The destructive aftermath of the recent skirmish delayed that plan."

This put Major Verle in a worse position than he wished. Though the task force was still capable of fielding a respectable amount of spaceborn and landbound mechs, the shortages would hurt. Less mechs meant less reserves and a smaller margin for error.

Verle should have access to most of this information already. Ves was very punctual in his reports. It seemed to him that the man was desperate for hope.

Unfortunately for the both of them, Ves couldn't magically conjure up additional mechs. Hope didn't work that way.

"I will endeavor to ready as much mechs as possible in time for the raid, but don't expect too much from us, sir."

"We shall settle on that."

Ves walked away with a lot of uncertainty from that. The longer this trip progressed, the more he understood Verle's burden. Despite knowing little

about the mech officer's history, he felt he became more in tune with Verle with each passing day.

The Hachew System shouldn't pose any threat to the Vandals. It was a system whose wealth sat between a rural system and an industrial system. In other words, wealthier than Cloudy Curtain but poorer than the Detemen System.

Unless Venidse predicted their destination beforehand, the Hachew System shouldn't be capable of inflicting heavy casualties to the Vandals.

Yet hadn't the LMC once trounced a Vesian raiding party?

"Don't underestimate the locals."

The Flagrant Vandals chose to raid the Hachew System because it held a number of strategically important mines to them. Any mine of value would be guarded. Fighting past these company forces was a nuisance at best, and a serious hindrance at worse.

"Besides the company forces, there's also reinforcements to consider."

The Vesians were still up in arms about their mortal enemy gallivanting in their space. Venidse might have felt a lot of schadenfreude when Imodris failed to stop the escaping Vandals from leaving their territory. Now that they ended up in Venidse space, the duchy couldn't afford to be as incompetent as Imodris back then. They would be hard at work trying to seek and destroy their vulnerable fleet.

The next couple of days, Ves threw himself into his work again. He exhorted his subordinates to speed up their repair work. Even one extra mech could make a lot of difference on the battlefield.

He even decided to pull up his own sleeves and perform some hands-on repairs of the most difficult cases aboard the Shield of Hispania. A lot of mech

technicians looked perplexed when the head designer got his hands dirty, but Ves had been able to shorten a broken Inheritor's repairs in a single day where it took a full crew of mech technicians an entire week.

The work served as a nice distraction from the difficulties he had to deal with on a daily basis. That was also why he didn't show up again after repairing two of the most difficult mechs. It wasn't appropriate for him to devote all of his time to grunt work.

Back at his office, Ves got to play the manager. He juggled various responsibilities and priorities at once. All of this work and effort sent him into a contemplative mood.

"Is it worth it?"

Iris looked up again from her corner desk. "What's that, boss?"

"Do you ever think about how much effort we put in fabricating, selling, using, repairing and recycling mechs? How much money and resources are we expending on using mechs? The Flagrant Vandals alone are wasting billions of credits on an annual basis to maintain their strength. It's mind-boggling once you think about it. Are we working in vain?"

"I hope not." Iris furrowed her brow. "We're mech designers. If everyone stops using mechs, we'll all go out of business."

"The mech craze that has infected humanity four-hundred years ago is pretty much an artificial phenomenon. If not for the restriction on warships and the enforcement of the taboos, we would still be waging war with mighty ships."

"We would have been extinct by that time, sir. We were too eager with wiping out our own planets. I'm glad our race as a whole had managed to come together and agree to switch to mechs as a way to resolve our differences. We don't have to fear from genocidal maniacs anymore."

Ves shrugged at that. "All I'm saying is that there is a price for that. If you compare mechs to warships, which one do you think will prevail?"

He once witnessed a single small warships tearing apart a horde of spaceborn pirate mechs in the Glowing Planet campaign. That image of complete annihilation had been seared into his brain like a trauma that would never go away.

Ever since then, his faith in mechs had been cracked.

"Much of humanity has been proven to be too irresponsible for their own good. The intervention of the CFA and MTA was necessary to save our race from a spiral of destruction. Even they treated us as kids playing with fire, it's for the best."

"Being treated like children means we aren't allowed to grow up." Ves retorted. "It's been four-hundred years. I think we've learned enough lessons now. All of this mech warfare seems like play-acting to me sometimes."

Iris looked concerned. "Are you ill, sir? Do you need to visit the infirmary again? I've never heard of a mech designer who questions his own craft!"

"I don't know what's wrong with me either, but I'm not sick. I just have a premonition that the status quo can't go on forever. One day, the system will break."

Even without any solid proof, Ves believed what he said. Mechs were fine tools of war, but when it came down to it, a mech could never match the destruction that could be unleashed by a proper warship.

Some day, all of humanity had need of that destruction.

Chapter 537 Open Gates

"When we made plans to raid the Hachew System, I expected our mechs to batter the Vesians every step of the way." Ves spoke with a perplexed

expression. "Rather than acting as the barbarians at the gates, I feel as if we are more like the tax collector coming to collect the annual tax."

When the Verle Task Force emerged out of FTL in the Hachew System, the local garrison immediately panicked. Instead of readying themselves to fight to the death, the outnumbered and outgunned defense squadron immediately fled to the nearest Lagrange point and transitioned to anywhere but here.

This allowed the Flagrant Vandals to waltz towards Hachew III, the only inhabited planet in the system. Once the combat carriers that conveyed their landbound mechs made landfall, they came across deserted cities, open warehouses and meagerly defended industries.

Not a single inhabitant took up arms to defend against the invaders. Without any signs of organized opposition, the Vandals practically acted with impunity on the surface of Hachew III!

While the Vandals remained alert and ready to switch to battle mode, there was also a palpable sense of ease running through their heads. Nobody in the command center seemed suspicious that they had entered a trap of sorts.

After slogging through the Detemen Operation and getting their butts kicked by the Calico Dancer Bats, Ves had a hard time trying to adjust to the lack of obstacles put in their way. What was it about the Hachew System that made them lose their will to fight?

"Iris?"

"It's simple, really. The ruler of Hachew III is Baron Imica of House Sabanet. His lineage isn't as long and storied as that of a count. His defense force only consists of three companies of spaceborn mechs and four companies of landbound mechs. Do you think that's a lot? The Flagrant Vandals can easily smash them apart, especially considering we are talking about garrison mechs!"

"Even then, it would benefit Venidse if House Sabanet puts up a fight. They're outnumbered, but not to the extent where we can win an instant victory. If they resort to harassment and guerilla warfare, they can easily ruin our raid."

"There's the key, boss. What does Baron Imica have to do with Venidse? The Duke of Venidse doesn't care about a tiny baron at all! Certainly, Baron Imica can order his household troops to put up a valiant fight against us, but what will that accomplish? Victory is impossible, and at worst he might lose all of the mechs he painstakingly funded over several decades. The Hachew System barely ekes out a profit for the house, so each mech is extraordinarily valuable to him. Unless he stands to gain more than he loses, Baron Imica will absolutely refuse to throw away his mechs to a lost cause."

"That's surprisingly rational of the baron." Ves remarked as if he had never seen a rational noble before. "Won't he get punished by Venidse?"

"Hah! No duke can compel a baron to send the foundation of his power into a suicide mission. Garrison mechs stand no chance against proper military mechs, and that's not taking into account that we outnumber them.

Conserving your strength and denying us an easy victory is par for the course. At worst, House Sabanet will suffer a couple of years of disgrace and become a pariah in high society, but as long as they maintain their strength, they won't have to worry about their rivals deposing them from power."

Ves frowned at that. "This sounds as if House Sabanet are more wary of their domestic rivals than a foreign enemy."

"This raid is a one-off chance. The chances that Vandals will return to raid their planet again is practically nil. They've probably written off their material losses as a consequence from a massive freak accident. Wealth and goods is easy to replenish, but control over an entire planet is harder to regain when lost."

What Iris said probably rang true. The Vandal mechs that made landfall sauntered over the planet like they owned it. Though many industry complexes brandished their company forces, when push came to shove, the company goons retreated without firing a single shot.

The previous displays of intimidation always turned out to be bluffs. The company forces had orders to dissuade the Vandals from picking a fight with them, but because they were vastly outnumbered, their owners were loathe to throw them away in a senseless battle.

House Sabanet already set an example for the smaller players to follow. If the big guys refused to make a sacrifice, why should everyone else be selfless? It was every Vesian for themselves!

"Compared to foreign aggressors like you, their rivals are more immediate opponents to House Sabanet." Iris continued her explanation. "In the eyes of their neighbors, they want nothing more than see House Sabanet lose all of their mechs in a lopsided battle. Once the Vandals take their spoils and leave, the rivals can swoop in to claim Hachew III from the hands of the now-toothless House."

"That sounds really messed up. If House Sabanet sacrifices their mechs in battle against us, they should receive a commendation!"

"Who would give them their commendation? Hm? Mechs are expensive. Even Venidse can't magically compensate two-hundred mechs to a small baron on a whim. The games nobility play is a ruthless one. When it comes down to it, the best players don't care about duty, honor or accomplishments. They only care about how many mechs you can field and how hard it is to dislodge you from power. Even between liege lord and vassal, relations are frosty to the point where they won't hesitate to stab each other in the back when they can get away with such an act."

All of this neatly explained the cynical decision-making of the nobles who ruled the various demesnes of the Vesia Kingdom. The more Ves heard the details, the more he grew confused. "I don't understand. How can this mutual lack of trust even work? The more you explain it to me, the more I think of the Kingdom as an unwilling collection of selfish Houses."

"Ah, but that's exactly why the Kingdom still stands! Relations, connections, favors and rules all prop up its stability, but only at the surface. Underneath it all, friends can turn into enemies on a dime, favors can easily be forgotten and only the victors make the rules. The fundamental basis that allows a House to stand on their own is whether they possess the power to defend what is theirs. Newly enfeoffed nobles are often met with a rude awakening when they are first introduced in the ways the powerful play the game."

The sordid way the Kingdom ran its power plays made perverse sense to Ves, but he still couldn't quite adjust his mentality around this reality. "If every Vesian yields in front of the Vandals when they are coming to raid them, what stops us from taking advantage of it?"

"Oh, this is only because the Vandals are currently in the inner reaches of the Kingdom. Normally, these well-off territories are protected by the peripheral and border territories, so they never had to deal with any foreign raids. It's different at the border system. At first, these poor and struggling border systems yielded without a fight when the Vandals came to steal their riches. After doing it once, don't you think the Vandals will do it again?"

"So the Vandals actually took advantage of this?"

"Yup, up until the border systems wised up. Letting the Vandals treat them as their personal bank account was just encouraging them to suck all of their wealth away. Once they wised up and banded together, the Vandals could no longer roll over an under-defended star system. No matter how badly they were outnumbered, the garrison forces always fought as if their lives

depended on it. This deterred the Vandals from raiding their systems with regularity."

It was much like how a bully pushed around someone weak for the first time. If the victim acquiesced to the bully and let them do whatever they wanted, the bully would just keep coming back and push even harder. Only by standing up would the bully have to contemplate whether it was worth it to push the victim again.

Evidently, the border systems had all become jaded enough to learn that they should never let anything go for free. Compared to the tough border systems, the star systems in the core territories of the Kingdom hadn't learned this lesson yet. They continued to obsess over their closest rivals and dismissed the threat of the Vandals!

Even though Ves had a lot of misgivings about this situation, he sobered up enough to take advantage of the lack of opposition. He helped guide the Vandals in picking out the best locations to raid. He felt like a kid entering the biggest toy store in the galaxy with an unlimited credit balance. The only limitation that restricted him from robbing the whole place blind was time.

They didn't have enough time. Even with the lack of fighting, they still couldn't afford to stick around for long before reinforcements arrived. Fortunately, the Hachew System wasn't close to any military strongholds.

After some time, Major Verle came to ask him a question. "Since we aren't facing any opposition in this raid, we are gathering much more goods than we projected. Will it be sufficient to meet all of our needs?"

Ves shook his head. "Far from it, sir. The stockpiles we are obtaining are very much needed, but they don't come in enough volume. I'd say we can only meet eighty percent of our current needs, and that is only with regards to these specific materials. We need other metals and compounds to round out

our other needs. All in all, our supply situation looks a lot better now, but it's far from perfect."

"Hm. Once we are out of this star system, we'll be conducting a trade with the Venidse Liberators. I hope we can obtain some of what we need from them. It's going to be our only trade until we cross into Klein or Hafner."

They wouldn't trade much but the bare essentials, Ves knew. After a bit more talk, the major turned his attention to other matters, leaving Ves free to direct the raiding Vandals into pillaging more goods.

It felt rather strange for him to wield such power. Though the Vandals only treated his directions as suggestions, they placed so much faith in his judgement that he might as well be commanding them directly. His every decision decided whether a business survived or fell in this ordeal.

Sometimes, Ves had the illusion that he was playing god.

He didn't feel particularly guilty in ruining the Vesian businesses. Their states were at war, after all, and stripping and destroying each other's industries was as common as drinking water.

Perhaps this was what a proper raid looked like. Ves only had the botched Imodris Raid on the Mech Nursery and the Detemen Operation to go on. In both cases, the attackers and defenders fought with conviction. Here, Hachew III didn't even wait for the first blow to arrive before it collapsed.

Ves found the experience to be oddly hollow. There was a break in tradition. An imperfection in an otherwise perfect image. There should have been more fighting before they obtained their prize.

Was the Vesia Kingdom really so weak? The way the nobles distrusted each other practically weakened their state by half.

He would never want to live in this confusing and contradictory state. The Bright Republic might not be perfect, but Ves gained a new appreciation of how sane it was being run.

After an entire day of peaceful ransacking, their landbound mechs packed everything up and entered their combat carriers, which slowly ascended into space. Laden with much-needed resources and supplies, the invigorated Vandals leisurely disappeared from the hairs of House Sabanet after transitioning into FTL at a Lagrange point.

Chapter 538 Making the Rounds

Despite fearing the might of Venidse's mech legions, the Vandals had seen neither hair nor hide of their formidable ships or mechs.

The effortless raid on the Hachew System allowed them to replenish some of their critical resources and supplies, but it also exposed their position to the entire Kingdom. As a powerful duchy on par with Imodris, Venidse could not afford to leave an impression that they would let any enemy walk over them at their leisure.

From the intelligence reports that Ves sometimes received, he understood that the shameful procession at Hachew had really kicked Venidse into action. They sent out much more scouts and leveraged more vassals into making more than a token attempt at obeying their instructions.

Considering what he knew about their relations, that wasn't saying much. The Duke of Venidse was pretty much on his own, and that allowed the Venidse Liberators to run rings around his intelligence gathering operation.

Unlike the Detemen League, the Venidse Liberators spanned more than just a single planet. The general undercurrent among the underclass in Vendise was so dissatisfied with House Venidse that they had a presence in virtually every star system in the territory.

Their reach, clout and numbers gave them a certain amount of strength. Their cells accumulated a fair amount of ships and mechs that had proven themselves to be a real nuisance to Venidse. Their nuisance factor was compounded by the fact that the Liberators weren't stupid enough to fight Venidse's mech legions in open combat.

Instead, they stuck to classic insurgency tactics and fought where Venidse was at their weakest. Ves admired their prudence. Even as they grew in strength, they didn't let their power get ahead of themselves, but continued to bide their time until they arrived at the right moment.

Under the guidance of the Vesian Liberation Front and the Venidse Liberators, they arrived at another quiet star system to conduct their trade. Lieutenant Commander Soapstone spearheaded the transaction with the Liberators while Iris Jupiter tagged along to represent the interests of the VLF. Ves was explicitly excluded from contacting the rebels due to his special status.

He didn't really mind. After a while, one rebel group was the same as any other. Ves had already given his input on the goods they urgently needed to obtain. Soapstone had not been entirely clear about her commitment to fulfill his wishlist. She probably had her own priorities in mind, and needed to fulfill the needs of other departments as well.

Mechs were important, but the ships also needed repairs. Their cracked and pitted armor still bore the scars of recent missile and mine impacts. Some of their less robust combat carriers didn't have much of a buffer left.

As the Vandal fleet floated motionlessly in space next to a rebel trade convoy, Ves spent his time on making the rounds. He rode a spare shuttle to visit the Antecedent, the Gorgon's Gaze, the Finmoth Regal, the Beggar's Bounty and every other important ship.

Each visit, he would meet with the mech designer assigned to ship and check up on their work. Though Ves had a pretty good idea of their results from the reports he received, he found it best to verify their work first-hand and ask some pertinent questions.

The lower-ranked mech designers mostly took the opportunity to ask some questions, and since Ves felt a bit generous today, he casually gifted them with a couple of insightful pointers.

When Ves visited Vedette aboard the Finmoth Regal, the timid low-ranking mech designer seemed to get his act together. Though the mech technicians obviously didn't respect a wimp, Vedette managed to instill the impression that Ves backed his every move. Defying Vedette was the same as defying Ves, and no one wished to do the latter.

Ves applauded his junior's solution and clapped his back. "It's not as good as earning the rabble's respect, but at least you're getting there. If the mech technicians give you any lip, don't hesitate to give me a call. The thing about borrowing someone else's name is that you have to be sure that they're willing to back you up. Right now, you're an extension of my will, so it's a given that I'll help you out."

"Thank you, sir. I was hesitating whether I was doing the right thing, but I'm glad I have your permission." Vedette nodded in gratitude.

"This is only a stopgap solution though. You need to earn their fear or respect. I can't help you much there, but from my experience showing off your superior knowledge always works."

"That's easier said than done, Mr. Larkinson." Vedette smiled ruefully.

"Although I can call myself a mech designer, I am but an ant compared to you. The gulf between is too wide for me to catch up."

"You don't need to reach my level to instill some appreciation from the techs. Just work on it and you will see."

"That's the problem. I know some stuff, but not enough to impress the Vandals."

"Then learn some more!" Ves clapped Vedette's back again. "Have you forgotten about the rewards I've dangled in front of you?"

"It's too challenging! I'm barely meeting my weekly quota, and I don't have the spare time to catch up on my studies. I appreciate the option to borrow a textbook from the central database, but the reading material is too opaque! Even with half a year, I still won't understand the essence of what they are trying to teach!"

Ves sighed in exasperation. "Doesn't the central database have beginner books? Maybe you should start with that instead. Don't chew off more than you can bite."

"That seems like a waste, sir. Those beginner books for Novices are so simple that I understand ninety percent of what they say."

"That's sad, Mr. Vedette." Ves shook his head as if he was a disappointed parent. "A mech designer of your age and level should understand the entire contents of a basic book. That ten percent you are struggling with is needed to make sense of more advanced knowledge. What I'm trying to say is that you shouldn't put the cart before the horse."

That put Vedette to thought. It was difficult for him to admit he needed to shore up his fundamentals, but that was for him to overcome. Ves didn't have the time to waste on guiding Vedette to the right path.

Frankly, Vedette didn't look all that bright, but if there was one thing that Ves didn't worry about, it was talent.

He would rather recruit a talentless but earnest mech designer to a talented but scheming bastard. In fact, Vedette happened to tick most of the boxes that Ves was after. His junior in the craft possessed so little self-esteem that Ves relished in molding the man into his desired image.

It was much like constructing an image for a mech, in a way. Instead of working with metals and alloys, he was trying to manipulate an innocent being of flesh and blood.

Sometimes, Ves felt guilty about his interactions with the weak. It was as if he was brainwashing them into forms that pleased him more. He quickly soothed his conscience by convincing himself that he was merely talking to them instead of sticking a neural interface on their heads and force fed their brains with arbitrary rules.

A handful of other low-ranking mech designers proved pliable, though they lacked that special reverence towards him that made it easier to pull them into his orbit.

The only mech designers he would rather avoid were Mercator and Trozin. The former never resigned himself to losing against Ves, and had stirred up trouble more than once.

The worst instance so far was his attempt to blame the fiasco and the bombings at the Finmoth Regal to Ves. Nevermind that Mercator was supposed to keep an eye on Vedette. As the ultimate mech designer responsible for the entire procession, Ves held ultimate responsibility.

"Did you hear? Our head designer dropped the ball! If he was actually smart, he would have caught wind of what went on at the Finmoth Regal!"

"Mr. Larkinson is only the head designer because of his famous family name. If he was called by any other name, he wouldn't have been promoted to this high status."

All of that led to a number of sordid rumors among the lower ranks that collectively cast some shade on him. While they didn't inconvenience Ves so far, he still felt peeved that he gained an ambivalent reputation.

Of his two main rivals for his job, Ves regarded Emlanin Trozin with a bit more wariness. Iris always treated the female Apprentice Mech Designer as a snake in the grass. While Ves did not pay much attention to Trozin these last few days, he began to realize that may have been the point.

Not one for letting things fester, Ves paid more attention when he boarded her ship. As soon as the security checks and the ceremonies were dispensed with, Ves pulled Trozin into the nearest available conference room.

"If I may ask, sir, why did you seek me out?" She started, eying Ves with a wary expression. "I have work to do. I'm sure you don't want to deal with more delays."

"Just wait a moment, Miss Trozin." Ves held up his hand. "Work is important, but communicating with each other is also something which must be done. Ever since my field promotion was set in stone, I haven't heard much from you. From the latest reports, you've delivered no more than what is required."

"Meeting the quota is a significant burden." She replied. "I've compared my quotas to others and I've noticed that you've piled a lot more demands on my shoulders. It is taking me every waking moment to figure out a workable solution. In addition, I have to supervise a bunch of talentless mech designers as well!"

"It is not my intention to crush you under so many responsibilities! In fact, I was pretty certain that a mech designer with your capabilities would grow into the demands I've set upon you."

"We are just different mech designers, sir! What you find easy is an impossible challenge to me!"

Was Trozin telling the truth. Ves thought he had gauged his deputies pretty well. He couldn't determine whether Trozin was pulling off a trick or not. In the absence of any evidence, Ves had no choice but to believe she genuinely couldn't keep up.

"What is it about the work that you are having trouble with? As I recall, your record states that you specialize in kinetic weapons."

"Correct. Back in the Hellcat design team, I was one of the few mech designers that fully understood their nail drivers. I excel in working with weapons. As for mech frames, not so much."

"That sounds as if you are an equipment designer rather than a mech designer."

"My career is what it is." She shrugged. "I'm catching up with my studies. Ah, I have access to my own books. I don't need your help."

"You have family among the Vandals as well, I take it. Is Captain Branser stationed at the Wolf Mother your uncle?"

"He is, though we're not in touch right now."

Trozin refused to elaborate on the matter. Ves found it hard to probe the woman and gain a measure of her personality. She stonewalled him at every opportunity, and it went so bad that Ves couldn't figure out where she studied or why she had been assigned to the Vandals instead of a better mech regiment. The records Ves recently accessed only extended up to a point.

Ves sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Okay. Leaving aside your work, do you need some help? Is there anything you want to pass on to me?"

Her eyes seemed to glow at him. "There is one question that's been nagging me all this while. I wonder if you are willing to tell me truth."

"As long as it doesn't touch into classified territory, I'm more than willing to answer your question."

"Good, because this one has been consuming me ever since we left the Detemen System." Trozin took a deep breath before she faced Ves. "Tell me this, is our task force playing the role of bait to the Vesians?"

Chapter 539 Repair Work

Trozin's question came out of the blue. This wasn't the first time Ves heard something like this. One thing about the Flagrant Vandals was that they incessantly chatted about topics that ordinarily shouldn't be discussed. Besides strictly classified material, everything was fair game.

Her question echoed the concerns of many Vandals assigned to the Verle Task Force. Why did the main fleet split in two, and why had Colonel Lowenfield gathered all of their best assets to the fleet that fled in the direction of home?

The Verle Task Force could have fled to the Bright Republic as well after taking a small detour. In fact, their chances of making it through hostile space was significantly higher if the main fleet reconvened. Splitting their strength at this junction only allowed the Vesians to defeat them in detail.

If nobody questioned this dubious progression, then the Vandals were too stupid to live.

From his occasional inspections, he gathered that the Vandals among the task force felt a bit ambivalent about their supposed mission. The Reinald Republic was a non-entity in their eyes. If the Bright Republic wanted to make contact with Reinald, then they could have sent a simple courier on a roundabout path.

Thus, the most popular theories that circulated among the rank and file attempted to explain this situation.

The first theory was that during the Detemen Operation, the Detemen League hadn't taken their most important captive with them. Instead, Lord Javier of House Eniqqin had actually been handed over to the Flagrant Vandals, who kept this important noble captive within their midst!

If this was true, then they truly carried a hot potato. Count Loqer would never rest while his only natural heir slipped out of his grasp! He would surely wield his influence into intensifying the search for the slippery Vandals.

The second theory that made the rounds was that Colonel Lowenfield or someone higher up the chain of command cold-heartedly cast them off as a distraction to the furious Vesians. If the Vandals fled in a single cohesive fleet, not only would their size make it harder for them to hide, they would also attract an inordinate amount of attention.

Halving their concentration reduced their threat profile because it made it harder for them to raid well-defended star systems along their escape path. This gave some reassurance to the Vesians and lowered their priority to chase the Vandals down. As long as their interests weren't threatened, they had little reason to commit to the hunt.

Although this sounded like a good outcome, it also made it easier for the Vandals to suffer a defeat. If not for the split, the Vandals would never sustain such exaggerated losses against two mech companies of the Calico Dancer Bats.

The Verle Task Force walked a dangerous path right now. Compared to the diminished main fleet that included Colonel Lowenfield, the Wolf Mother, their remaining Senior and Journeyman Mech Designers and more, Ves and Trozin had the illusion that they'd been orphaned.

Of course, even if the Vandals heartlessly decided to write them off, Ves couldn't give in to the cynicism. "I can't answer your question. Even if I knew,

there's no reason for me to clear up your confusion. No matter the intentions of the brass, it's not our job to concern ourselves with whatever strategies the Vandals are cooking up."

"Sir, I can't accept that answer." She said in a terse manner. "I've heard that you're close to the major. Surely you must have figured out a hint or two."

"Just drop it, Miss Trozin. No matter what our true mission is, our opinions won't make a difference. Our actions will. Do your work to the best of your ability in order to maximize our chances of survival."

It took some time for Trozin to accept the fact that Ves wouldn't tell her anything. They quickly ended their discussion after that. Since Ves lost his mood to talk, he took an immediate shuttle ride back to the Shield of Hispania.

After the Flagrant Vandals and the Venidse Liberators finished their trade, the two fleets separated from each other and went their separate ways. The Vandals quickly transitioned into FTL as soon as the coast was clear.

The new materials the Liberators traded to the Vandals increased the pace of the ongoing repairs. Many critical shortages had temporarily been addressed, but it wouldn't take long for this abundance to end. The Vandals withheld much of their valuable loot and only let go of the absolute minimum.

They still aimed to bring the valuables they obtained in the Detemen System to the Reinald Republic where they could expect to exchange them for fair market prices.

The difference between selling the loot to the rebels and selling it at a neutral market amounted to at least fifty billion credits! That sum alone wiped off a fourth of their debt burden!

No matter what, they couldn't let go of such a juicy prize. Even if their mechs and ships began to run ragged, the Vandals still hated to let go of so much credits. Some would even die for the Vandals to succeed!

More mechs received repairs. They temporarily decided to halt the restoration of the landbound mechs in favor of restoring their spaceborn combat capabilities. During the previous skirmish, a lot of Inheritors sustained damage.

The new materials allowed the mech technicians to begin with implementing more drastic repairs. Heavily-damaged or outright wrecked specimens of Inheritor mechs required a significant amount of resources to replace what wasn't there anymore.

Space combat had a tendency to fling debris and broken parts across light-years. Complete recovery of every piece of salvage couldn't be done on the battlefield. Besides, the Vandals had been in a hurry back then, so they didn't bother retrieving anything but the bare essentials.

This left the task force with a fair amount of partially-intact Inheritor mechs. As the light skirmisher model boasted fairly thin armor, the damage these mechs sustained often amounted to serious internal damage. Lost limbs and holes that ran through the entire frame was not an uncommon sight.

Compared to the mechs that only fried their internals, these seriously-damaged mechs required much more materials to supplement their losses.

Ves spent a fair amount of time to plan out the repairs. Over fifty heavily-damaged Inheritor mech frames each exhibited different battle wounds. Normal procedure would have been to delegate the repair plans to the mech designers on site, but Ves decided to draw up the plans himself due to his superior ability.

By making the plans himself, he prevented his incompetent subordinates from fumbling through the repair process and waste an inordinate amount of resources and time.

The work happened to stimulate him. Each individual mech was a unique creation. Though they all drew upon the same Inheritor design, months or years of continued use had led to the proliferation of small divergences and minor idiosyncrasies.

"Every mech is unique. The older they are, the more they take on their own life."

From a professional standpoint, this was a natural but not entirely welcome development. Each mech differed in small ways as mech pilots sought out the closest mech designers at hand to request modest tweaks and modifications to cater to their individual piloting style.

Mech pilots ordinarily stuck to their assigned mechs for years. This constant and continued use of the same mech by the same pilot inevitably led to a divergence in their evolution.

The reason why this wasn't a desirable development was that it made it harder to implement global upgrades to the design. It also complicated mass repair work. The Vandals worked with a fleet of fairly aged mechs, each of which had gone through three or more rounds of modification.

This meant that to repair these individual works, they each required their own tailor-made repair plan. If clueless mech technicians decided to apply standard upgrades, then the chances of introducing faults magnified to an unacceptable level.

The design of the Inheritor was exceedingly complex for such a cheap mech. It incorporated many nuances that Ves didn't entirely understand.

Nonetheless, out of every mech designer in the task force, Ves tentatively believed his understanding of the design exceeded others by a wide margin. Thus, he straightforwardly snatched this task from the hands of his subordinates and returned with complete repair plans only a day later.

Out of every Skill that helped, Ves had to thank his Jury-Rigging Sub-Skill the most. The knowledge provided by this Sub-Skill enabled him to find substitutes to more expensive materials. In essence, it allowed him to do less with more. Although his makeshift solutions cut a lot of corners, the damaged Inheritors should at least be able to last long enough to reach the end of this mission.

Everything seemed to go well since they entered Venidse. The large and industrious duchy boasted lots of star systems, of which Venidse invested only a fraction of their wealth to inhabit them. If Venidse wanted to find their trace, they faced the same difficulty as finding a needle in a haystack.

With the Venidse Liberators covering their back, the Vandals received some assurances of their safe passage. Ves heard some rumors in the corridors that one of the reasons why the Vandals allowed themselves to be ripped off in their recent trade was to increase their reward for performing this service for the task force.

After all, the relations between the different rebel groups and the Flagrant Vandals looked like a mixed bag. The Vandals had a much better relationships with the rebel groups that operated close to the border between the Bright Republic and Vesia Kingdom.

Now that they crossed over to the other side of the Kingdom, the Vandals pretty much traveled through uncharted territory for them. They had never come into contact with the Venidse Liberators before. If not for the introduction and mediation by the Vesian Revolutionary Front, the Vandals would have been forced to fight through countless mechs in order to cross through their territory.

Still, extending their trust to complete strangers had their downsides. Just as they arrived near the border between Venidse and Klein, the task force emerged into a tiny star system that wasn't as desolate as they thought.

The first signs of something wrong was when the alarms blared throughout the entire fleet! Explosive shells thundered out of nowhere and detonated against the engines of several important ships!

They were under attack!

"Everyone get to battle stations!"

"No signs of enemy mechs or ships in the vicinity!"

"We are being hit by close-ranged shells! Our assailants are in stealth!"

"Deploy anti-stealth measures!"

Over seven ships simultaneously incurred substantial damage to their thrusters and engines. Two more ships sustained heavy damage to their engineering bays. Besides felling a substantial amount of engineers, the shells also managed to damage the outer housing of their all-important FTL drives!

Without any FTL, they could forget about escape!

The moment the alarms blasted against their ears, Ves and Iris looked at each other with panic and immediately changed into their hazards suits. After his previous ordeals, Ves made a habit out of cramming in a couple of emergency supplies in his cabin and workplace.

This came incredibly handy at this moment as it took barely a minute for them to become enclosed in protective armor.

Though they looked rather goofy, the rest of the Vandals adjusted their outer appearances as well. Decompression, lethal radiation and intensive temperature fluctuations all possessed enough harm to snuff out their lives if they gathered in strength.

The spacers aboard the Shield of Hispania largely didn't bother wearing anything bulky. They largely adorned their own brand of vacsuits that didn't

hinder their precision work. In exchange, their suits only protected them from a certain level of damage.

Ves daydreamed about cladding himself with the most superior armor as he stepped inside the command center and took his usual seat. Only half of the console operators arrived so far. The inconvenient timing made it clear that this attack was preordained.

"What happened?"

"Stealth mechs are attacking our mechs! They don't have the firepower to destroy one of our ships, so instead they are attempting to sabotage our mobility!"

Chapter 540 Fractured State

The war raged on. The fighting at the frontlines showed signs of subsiding. As predicted by the Republic, the Vesian aggressors began to run out of steam. Pushing into the Republic's territory expended most of their supplies. Casualties began to pile up, and the burden of maintaining a presence on the captured border systems slowly added up.

Further incursions happened now and then, but the Mech Corps constantly mobilized more divisions to the front. The Bright Republic may have started the war on the back foot, but they quickly showed their mettle once their mech divisions accumulated in sufficient numbers to match their Vesian counterparts.

The events surrounding the Flagrant Vandals impacted the see-saw battles in a profound way. Not only did the Vesians start to lose heart a little faster than projected, they also seemed to show signs of sending some of their forces back in order to join the manhunt for the two Vandal fleets.

In the end, they stayed put. They couldn't afford to waste away the opening invasion. The Vesian strategists knew that they needed to secure as much

star systems as possible. The more star systems they conquered, the more they benefited from the added depth.

While the adventures of the Flagrant Vandals excited the Republic, the public eventually dismissed them as a sideshow. The real war was fought along the border of these two irreconcilable states. In that, the major trend hadn't diverged too much from everyone's expectations.

Melkor Larkinson read through the headlines published by all of the usual mouthpieces of the Republic and smiled sardonically. "Heh, if I really believe this crap, I'd be a fool."

According to the articles put out by the state, the Mech Corps inflicted heavy losses to the Mech Legion. For every mech the Republic lost, the Kingdom lost at least two mechs.

This was pure fantasy. While Melkor never fought in the war before, just like Ves he learned much from his uncles and aunts. One of their most important lessons was to disregard everyone's claims about how good or bad the Vesians fought. In all the ways that mattered, the Mech Corps and the Mech Legion pretty much matched each other in military prowess.

The Mech Legion boasted higher numbers as the Vesia Kingdom was blessed with a bit more space and population than their rival state. That said, their unity and coordination suffered enormously because every individual mech legion was controlled by the duchy that raised them from their own efforts.

No single war leader possessed the authority to direct the entire Mech Legion. That required the mutual respect and trust from every duchy in their notoriously fractured state.

For example, if a war leader sought to ingratiate themselves with Imodris, Venidse would immediately halt any cooperation. To Venidse, empowering Imodris was worse than letting the Bright Republic off the hook. If necessary,

Venidse would pull back all of their mech legions from the front in order to exert pressure on Imodris.

The periodic wars against the Bright Republic was pretty much a game to the nobles. In addition, centuries of deepening enmity between the states had driven the Vesian populace in a rabid frenzy against the Republic.

While the nobles played their games against each other, the commoners largely remained ignorant to their power struggles. In fact, the nobles didn't like it when the commoners became inured in their dirty laundry. They would rather direct their sheep to pay attention elsewhere.

The war against the Bright Republic formed a convenient way for the nobles to direct the energy of their commoners at. Many people in the Republic believed that the only reason the nobles tentatively fought alongside each other at the frontlines and committed so much military might was because they couldn't afford an extended period of peace.

The prevalence of rebel groups in their interior already spoke of the massive amount of discontent that was building up among their lower classes. While it seemed paradoxical for the Vesians to channel their best fighting forces towards fighting a foreign enemy rather than first cleaning house, the latter had proven to be supremely ineffective.

Rebels popped out all the time. With the way the nobles generally ran things, they would never be able to eradicate the scourge of insurrections. Like rats, each time the nobles painstakingly put down a single cell, two more cells would spring up elsewhere.

Only through waging a massive war against their bogeymen would the nobles be able to stir up everyone's patriotism and be able to deflect their attention from their own suffering.

Though it sounded like a precarious balance to maintain, the Vesians pretty much mastered the art of turning the Bright Republic into their bogeyman.

"Do the Vesians even want to win this war?"

Plenty of conspiracy theories circulated among both sides of the border. The wars between the two states had been so static that people couldn't help but think that both states played their own game with each other.

Still, no matter the truth, war was not a game, and plenty of people died during each and every outburst of violence.

Perhaps the only way the Vesia Kingdom might actually be able to win the war was if the royal family gained enough power to command the loyalty of the entire Mech Legion. In practice, this had never happened in their entire history except during the founding of both states.

By now, the royal family pretty much turned into figureheads for the Kingdom. Though they grasped as much power as any duchy if not more, they suffered from the combined suppression of every duchy under their rule.

In other words, they had become hostages to their own vassals!

This was a profoundly ironic circumstance in the history of the Kingdom considering the original intentions of its founder. The original founder of the Kingdom wanted to wield absolute power and rule over his state as their sole tyrant. This was why he adopted the feudal system in the first place.

It was a pity that his trusted subordinates who had been assigned as his dukes didn't necessarily agree. Though relations between the founding generation had been clear, once the subsequent generations grew into power, they began to chafe at their restrictions.

Eventually, the power wielded by the royals eroded to such an extent that they long since lost the influence to change the course of their entire state.

As the bogeymen of the Vesians, the Bright Republic wasn't as demonic as the commoners of the Kingdom thought. They styled themselves as a bastion of reason and rationality. Though they suffered from their own power struggles, it hadn't reached the self-cannibalizing state of their mortal enemies.

The Mech Corps was a consummate professional organization that largely steered away from the tribalism of the Mech Legion. While the commanders of the mech divisions still regarded themselves as rulers of their individual forces, they were very much aware that they didn't own the mech forces they commanded.

The Mech Corps funded almost every mech division from a centralized source. Frequent exchanges and transfers of funding, technology and personnel kept the mech divisions from becoming too isolated.

This allowed the Mech Corps to exert more effective military strength despite constantly being outnumbered by their Vesian counterparts. High command was not an illusion, and their individual forces actually followed their strategic planning.

Their coordination grew more potent with the addition of competent intelligence. The Bright Republic ran some of the more effective military intelligence operations. They easily exploited the divided nature of the Vesians and excelled in gathering critical intelligence. Sometimes, they even stole exclusive technology specifications before the Vesians had even begun to implement them in their own troops.

Nonetheless, the Bright Republic constantly teetered at the edge of defeat during each war. It was their conflict to lose. While the Vesians consistently hammered their defenses in the same one-dimensional offensives as before, the Mech Corps constantly needed to exert their full efforts just to place themselves on par with the Mech Legion.

It wasn't fair. The Vesians weren't actually putting their full effort in the war, yet they could easily push the frontlines if they exerted a little more effort on occasion.

Sadly, war was never fair. All it cared for was who had the biggest fist.

One of the main reasons the invasion stalled wasn't because the Vesians exhausted their men or ran out of supplies. It was actually because the nobles that held sway in the frontlines lost the heart to push through the turtle-like Republic.

"It's getting harder and harder to achieve a breakthrough. The hateful Republic is only focused on defending!"

"It's such a pain to sacrifice so many mechs to gain control over another dinky star system. The annual tax revenue of this star system isn't enough to fill the gap between my teeth!"

"I'm tired. Let's stop for a few months and go at it again when we are better prepared."

Of course, the desires of the nobles clashed against the professional soldiers who fought the actual battles. They deeply wanted to push through and defeat their rivals once and for all.

The differences in opinion changed nothing. In the Vesia Kingdom, the nobles held all the sway. If they all agreed to stop the offensive, then the push into Republic space would certainly stall.

Meanwhile, the Verle Task Force met with their latest crisis. The sudden sneak attack stank of a Venidse ambush. Every Vandal grew serious once the implications settled in their minds.

Surprisingly, rather than initiating combat with the Vandals with a large number of mechs, Venidse instead opted to begin their attack with an attack from stealth!

The Flagrant Vandals constantly maintained their vigilance each time they emerged out of FTL. This time was no different as up to a hundred spaceborn mechs deployed from the ships at any any time except when it was time to go.

The entire attack interval only lasted a couple of seconds. The stealth mechs that perpetrated the attacks obviously didn't wish to stick around long enough for the Vandals grasp their locations.

Major Verle only arrived at the command center half a minute later than Ves and Iris. Despite his relative tardiness, he quickly grasped their actual situation and issued the right commands.

"Deploy the dust! As much as you can!"

"Order our mech patrols to comb through their quadrant of space! Any suspicious signs and signals should be reported immediately!"

Every Vandal ship immediately threw out vast clouds of dust. Like the particle grenades that the rebels once deployed in Neron City, the dust clouds acted as a proven low-tech solution to skulking stealth mechs.

The only problem was that the expanding dust cloud showed nothing suspicious. Not a single area in the expandings clouds deformed!

"H-How is this possible?!" Major Verle gritted his teeth. He instantly turned to Ves. "Explain!"

Ves felt the intensity of the major's gaze. "Modern stealth technology has derived countless ways to circumvent such a crude detection method. Venidse excels in developing stealth mechs. They would have certainly tried to plug this obvious hole to their ability to remain hidden!"

"Fine then! If the dust cloud doesn't work, then let us pump out more ordnance into our perimeter!"

Akkara mechs started firing lasers into empty space. Missiles launched from their few missile-bearing mechs and exploded at predetermined coordinates. Nothing worked. Within a range of fifty kilometers, there didn't appear to be any enemies!

Everyone's faces grew ugly. Even Ves began to sour as his own search attempts accomplished nothing. He had to hand it to Venidse, they really mastered the use of stealth technology.

All of this left the task force frustrated, rattled and crippled. At the very least, this star system didn't appear to host any follow-up forces.

Their main concerns turned from stopping any further attacks from stealth to repairing their extensive battle damage.

Seven ships lost their sublight propulsion. This was not as big of a problem as it sounded. The real concern was that their vitally important logistics ships lost their FTL drives. Without this vitally important component, they couldn't run away!