

Chapter 111: Exploration

The star system was as quiet as a haunted house. Nothing popped up from the gas giants, asteroid fields and the other junk that orbited quietly through space. Besides the fallen base, the Barracuda detected no other signs of human habitation. Even if no threats had popped up, the ship still travelled cautiously, keeping its defenses on standby.

"The name of the game is caution." Ves explained to Dietrich as he tweaked the Harrier mech with the tools the Barracuda had in stock. "I don't want to step into a trap. I'd rather retreat and miss out on an opportunity than go in recklessly and gamble our lives."

Dietrich checked his own gear. While the Barracuda lacked an armory, the pilot brought his own gear. His main job was to pilot the Harrier, so he prepared to loan his spare pistol to Ves.

The light ballistic pistol fired smart projectiles that automatically changed their profile depending on what they encountered.

In the case of encountering armor, the bullet entered penetration mode, allowing it to punch through obstacles.

When facing flesh, the bullet entered fragmentation mode, which ensured unarmored targets suffered massive damage.

While the pistol was adaptable, its magazines only carried fifteen rounds. Dietrich customized the pistol and its bullets for accuracy. Due to his excellent marksmanship, he disabled the automatic tracking system that helped shooters aim on target. Before handing over the pistol, he reactivated the system so an amateur like Ves could actually hit something.

The Barracuda finally entered the barren planet's orbit after a day of travel. After a round of focused scanning, the ship found no imminent threats.

Though risky, Ves decided to let the Barracuda descend a kilometer away from the base. The ship smoothly sank into the ultrathin atmosphere of the planet and used her powerful thrusters and antigrav modules to moderate her descent. A ship as light as a corvette had no trouble entering or exiting the gravity well of an average planet.

Once the Barracuda extended her landing struts and landed on a somewhat level surface, the ship extended her powerful short-ranged sensors. A small hatch opened up and released a couple of tiny observation bots that spread out in a widening circle.

Ves stood on the bridge and studied the data gathered by the ship's extensive scanning. The topography of the map filled out in even greater detail. The map even showed what was buried underneath.

"There's no traces of traps nearby. It's safe to step out."

The Harrier stepped out of the Barracuda's cargo bay and engaged its flight module. The mech carefully lifted up in the air and patrolled the surroundings in a vigilant stance. Its ballistic rifle pointed at various rocks and other suspicious terrain features.

After ten minutes of elaborate scanning, a handful of observation bots finally approached the base. From its makeup, the scarred and ruined structure built along a cliff only served as the entrance to an underground complex. The bots carefully scanned the exterior before plunging into the gaping maw of the base.

In the meantime, both Ves and the Harrier approached the entrance of the base. Ves rode a small floating platform to the site with a curious Lucky clinging atop his shoulder. Bringing in anything else risked getting traced or hacked.

He already broke convention by employing observation bots. Ves prepared a crude standalone receiver that could interpret the data transmitted by the bots without exposing any other system. While it was not a foolproof method, it should delay any lingering defense mechanisms left behind.

The observation bots took their sweet time in mapping out the underground corridors. A lot of miscellaneous debris was strewn about. Many armored doors had been forced open. None of the scans detected any bodies or equipment. Only traces remained that told a story of a desperate defense.

Dietrich grew grim as he read the data from his cockpit. "The defenders went down fighting. If they are mercenaries, then they shouldn't have fought to the last man. This is strange."

"Perhaps you guessed wrong. The defenders might have disguised themselves as mercenaries."

"It could be that the people who hired these mercs compelled them to fight. It's not unusual for a shady corporation to keep their families as hostages."

Whatever the truth, the only way to find out was to step inside. Ves recalled the observation bots and sent them back to the ship. The Barracuda automatically corralled them into patrols. With their escape route secured, a mech and a suited human stepped inside the darkness.

The Harrier activated its powerful searchlights, illuminating the immediate area. Ves held a pistol in one hand and a hand-sized multiscanner in the other. The little device worked hard to make sense out of the cleaned-up battle site.

"My scanner estimates that up to seventy-five to ninety mechs exchanged fire from the traces left by the battle."

"The attackers came with the strength of an entire mech regiment. That's about fifty to sixty mechs. The defenders should have an equivalent strength."

If they were caught with their pants down, then only those on shift were ready to respond."

As the pair entered the tunnel, they reached a broken elevator shaft. With the Harrier's flight system and Ves' floating platform, they cautiously descended to the floor below. Outside the wide, mech-sized corridors, they encountered several gaping caverns.

Even without the scanner, Ves could tell the space functioned as a warehouse. "The spaces are divided into two sections. My guess is that incoming goods are stored in the left cavern while the finished products are stored in the right cavern."

"Too bad that everything's gone. The raiders haven't even let off the loading equipment."

All the signs pointed out that the base functioned as a production facility. This ignited their enthusiasm. Ves sniffed a chance to salvage valuable production equipment. Dietrich hoped the attackers missed out on a few stashes that he could sell for a fortune.

Lucky proved to be of use when Ves let the mechanical cat roam the emptied caverns. It managed to find scraps of ores and metals. None of the traces were exotic, so Ves quickly lost his interest.

They exited the warehouse section and floated down to the second underground floor. The grey reinforced metal walls made way for a warmer green tint.

"From the looks of it, the barracks and mech stables are on this floor."

They encountered empty beds, ruined leisure rooms and half-destroyed mech stables. The fighting here had been hard, but the defenders were already doomed. The Harrier carefully shoved some of the debris aside while Ves poked around the mech stables.

The scavengers left a lot of gear behind. Tools like wrenches, cutters and various batteries were strewn about. Ves picked up a cutter and inserted a spare battery. The tool lit up with a flare of focused heat and light.

"This thing's only worth a couple of thousand credits." Ves said and turned off the cutter before tossing it away. "Nothing here is worth our time."

The real valuables should be the mechs and any spare parts. Whoever emptied out the stables had done a thorough job.

Despite the desolation, Ves wasn't about to give up. He constantly stretched out his multiscanner and began to search the areas where the mech technicians stored their gear. Lucky sniffed around as well and quickly meowed in excitement.

"What's up, buddy? Did you find anything?"

The cat scratched at his paws against a typical metal floor panel. Ves deep-scanned the location with his multiscanner. The machine found signs of a hidden compartment.

"What have you found, Ves?"

"There should be something valuable underneath."

After a few minutes of fumbling, Ves failed to find any triggers.

"Do you want me to pry it open?"

"No. We don't want to ruin what's inside. If my guess is right, we could be looking at a small fortune. Let me handle it."

He picked up another random plasma cutter and proceeded to cut a hole in the floor. The last time he operated a full-powered plasma cutter was back when he studied at Rittersberg. He held the cutter with care and made sure he followed all of the safety guidelines he could still dredge up from his mind. The last thing he wanted to do was to splash his legs with heated plasma.

A couple of minutes later, he finished cutting a man-sized hole. He carefully shut off the plasma cutter and removed its battery. With the help of a magnetizing tool, he lifted the metal cutout and placed it to the side.

Just as Ves took a step inside, a laser beam seared against his torso. At the very last moment, his master's shield generator flickered to life, expending five percent of its charge in an instant.

"GET BACK!" Dietrich boomed from his mech as he pointed his ballistic rifle.

Ves jumped to the side, breaking the line of fire. He stretched out his palm.

"Don't shoot! You'll blow up everything inside!"

The Harrier held back not just due to the warning, but also because Ves was too close. The kinetic energy of a single mech-sized rifle could easily kill a human by proximity.

"As far as I know, there's only a single anti-infantry defense measure inside."

"Do you think it's a survivor?" Dietrich asked. He succeeded in pushing down his instinctive aggression once he saw that Ves mysteriously came off the attack without a single scorch mark.

"It's possible, but I doubt it. Whoever dug this out did it behind the backs of their bosses. They won't be using it to stash something as worthless as food and air."

"Let's call up an observation bot."

"No need. Just stretch out your Harrier's finger in the opening. We'll use your arm-mounted sensors to take a peek."

The fingers of a humanoid mech boasted very little armor, but they could easily withstand a single infantry-scale laser beam. As Dietrich did as Ves suggested, they both got a good look inside.

A small mounted light from the finger illuminated the hidden compartment. For a moment, both Ves and Dietrich were taken aback at the sight. Someone managed to stuff a whole container's worth of spare parts inside. The crude sensor-blocking wall panels added proof that it was an off-the-book operation.

"Let's take care of that defense bot first."

A single stationary defense bot remained active among the neatly stacked parts. Without any central direction, the cheap bot defaulted to its standard programming. Dietrich delicately flicked the Harrier's finger at the stupid bot, causing it to crunch and splash against the wall in a broken heap.

Just as Ves wanted to enter the compartment in order to finish off the bot, Lucky entered first and sliced the bot into pieces.

"Haha!" Dietrich laughed. "Looks like your pet it kind of pissed it almost killed its main source of food!"

Lucky had also been caught flat-footed by the surprise attack. Despite his deadly armament, his body only packed a limited amount of functionality. The cat's sensors were not as good as those carried by dedicated reconnaissance bots.

While Lucky vented his anger, Ves followed after his cat and scanned the compartment for any threats. Besides the broken bot, the compartment did not have any other surprises in store.

"That's a lot of spare parts." Dietrich noted as his sensors noted that all of the parts were in pristine condition. "We're looking at a mountain of credits. How did you know you'd find something like that?"

"It's a common scam among mech technicians." Ves responded as he rapped his knuckle against the surface of a packaged engine. "They're probably contractors or attached to the mercenary corps. It's a simple enough trick that only works if there's insufficient supervision. Since this base is supposed to be

hidden, the real owners of the base kept their exposure limited. This left a hole in which the mech technicians are able to report a higher incidence of wear-and-tear than is actually the case."

A light dawned on Dietrich's face. "I get it now. The owners sent them their replacement parts, unaware that the old ones are still in working condition. Since the replacements are all freshly fabricated parts, you can sell them for quite a sum in the black market. I bet the mercenary corps was in on this scam as well. Maybe they never even performed the live-fire exercises they reported to their bosses."

This slowed down the wear-and-tear of their mechs even further, but it also lowered the readiness of their pilots. The consequences of losing their edge was obvious. All signs pointed out that the base had fallen fairly quickly.

As Ves inventoried the parts, he let out a whistle. "The great thing about this cache is that the mech technicians knew what to pick. Most of what they stored consists of engines or power reactors. They're not as valuable as armor plating, but much of their composition is made out of exotics."

This meant that the goods were easier to smuggle out. Since the Barracuda only had limited storage space, this was ideal.

"Let's finish exploring the rest of the base before emptying out this cache."

Until they fully explored the base, Ves did not intend to take anything away. Danger might still be around the corner.

After failing to detect any other caches, the group entered the elevator shaft and entered the next floor downwards.

The observation bots encountered a lot of issues trying to parse the third floor. Far more wreckage than anywhere else still littered the entire floor. Most of it turned out to be ruined industrial fabrication equipment.

Ves held his breath once he entered a large production hall. He imagined how many industrial-grade 3D printers worked side-by-side churning out the same parts. There were three halls in total, and each of them hosted three identical production lines.

Lucky pounced on some wreckage, trying to claw his way inside. The entire place was a treasure house for a pet that fed on rare materials.

"Man, some crazy mech has gone to town in here. All the fancy stuff is wrecked." Dietrich noted as his mech idly kicked the outer cover of a valuable 3D printer. "I'd say the defenders destroyed these machines once they realized they were going down."

His guess came close to the truth. There was no reason why the aggressors would be so destructive when they robbed everything else down to their bones. A defending mech had methodically sabotaged each machine by slicing them with a sword.

Ves noted that two spaces had been cleared. They must have hosted the most intact 3D printers, ones that could be fixed up and sold for a very tidy sum. He approached one of the brutally slashed printers and tried to find some markings. He eventually noted the model.

DORTMUND V3-B INDUSTRIAL 3D PRINTER

"It's a Dortmund!" Ves exclaimed. His greedy eyes ran over the wrecked printer like it was a pile of credits. "This is one of the fastest 3D printer available in the local market! Its speed and precision is miles ahead of a regular commercial model and can even rival the machines from the Friday Coalition. Only the most established megacorporations are able to afford this machine!"

"That's interesting and all, but how much money are we talking about?"

"A brand new third generation Dortmund is worth at least 3 billion bright credits!"

Even Dietrich's heart skipped a beat when he heard that figure. He quickly lost his excitement once he took a closer look at the state of the printers. "They're all chopped up now. Even the raiders didn't bother to salvage these leftovers. They're worthless."

"That not entirely true." Ves retorted as his eyes practically turned into credit symbols as they carefully inspected the damage. "Originally there's nine identical Dortmunds. The raiders took two, leaving us with seven broken machines. What do you think about salvaging everything that's still intact and piece together a single working model?"

"Is that possible?"

"It's worth a try."

Both of them thought about the pros and cons about this action. If Ves was lucky, he might be able to replace his rickety old 3D printer with one that could keep up with his future needs. The only problem was salvaging and reconstructing a printer took a lot of time and expertise, both of which were in short supply.

"Can we afford to stick around? I know you're serious about this, Ves, but whoever took a bite here might be coming back for seconds."

"I can puzzle together the printer back at home, so we only need to gather all the scraps." Ves decided. He didn't want to stay in this system any longer than necessary.

This was the find of the decade for him. Now that he glimpsed a chance to acquire an expensive machine for free, he was not about to let it go.

"There's one final floor left for us to explore." Ves remarked as he firmly pulled Lucky to his side. "Let's quickly go and clear the rest of this place. We can start taking apart these beauties once we're done."

Chapter 112: Treasure Hunt

The fourth underground floor was the best defended one. The observation bots painted a gruesome picture of a desperate last stand. The reinforced walls and plentiful fixed emplacements suggested that this was a very important part of the base.

Once Ves and Dietrich's Harrier stepped past the ruined vault doors, they came across the remnants of a massacre. While, the invading force spent some efforts in cleaning up their tracks, they didn't put too much effort in wiping out the bloodstains.

"Whoever attacked this base has been very thorough so far. They're experienced and covering up their tracks. You'd think they do a better job on this floor."

Ves nodded in agreement. "Maybe they ran out of time."

If the attackers were in a hurry, they might have missed a couple of gems. The possibility fueled their anticipation. The abundant fortifications suggested that this floor certainly held a lot of value to the former owners of the base.

This also meant that the odds of encountering a lingering threat had risen by quite a bit. The observation bots found nothing active, but who knew what kind of booby traps remained.

"Lucky, can you scout ahead?"

The mechanical cat hissed at Ves.

"Oh, come on, I've gifted you that unknown chunk of ore. Can't you at least return the favor?"

After a brief back-and-forth, Ves convinced Lucky to act as their scout. In return, Ves promised Lucky a million credits worth of minerals when they returned home. The expenditure took out a big chunk of his savings, but considering his current gains, he could spare the money.

Motivated by piles of delicious food, the cat went about his role with gusto. The cat moved swiftly if a bit recklessly. Ves had to warn the cat to slow down several times.

They combed over the administrative department first. Not a single record remained. A scavenging party meticulously cleaned out all the terminals, processors and backups. Ves wasn't stupid enough to think they missed a spare.

Instead, he banked on the suspicion that the scavengers were in a bit of a hurry. He meticulously scanned the walls, floor and ceiling. Lucky helped out by employing his sensitive nose.

The mechanical cat's nose handedly outclassed the multiscanner. Ves borrowed the device from the Barracuda's lab, so that spoke volumes of Lucky's ability to distinguish smells.

The excited cat led him to a maintenance closet of all things. Lucky pawed a specific section of the wall.

When Ves came close, he held out his scanner. Nothing. Almost nothing. The only thing he registered was a faint rise in temperature. The difference was minimal. If Ves wasn't so close, he'd miss the signs.

After interpreting the data, Ves threw out a guess. "An active system is generating heat behind behind this wall. There's a box-sized area in front of us that's blocking out the rest of my scans."

"Sounds like we're dealing with a safe. In a place like this, it's bound to trigger an alarm or a self-destruct mechanism."

"That's quite possible. Even I'm not confident in disarming this trap." He obtained a good impression of the build quality of this facility. This was the work of experts, not a bunch of pirates with too much free time on their hands. "If it wasn't for Lucky, we'd be clueless. For now, let's leave this safe for last."

They didn't want to trip any alarms. For now, Ves prioritized the recovery of the parts for the Dortmund. In his eyes, the utility of a functioning high-quality 3D printer trumped any other possible gains.

After sweeping the administration department, they crossed the corridors and reached an even larger fortification. The size and thickness of the broken vault doors showed that it wasn't easy cracking this last part open.

"The attackers came prepared." Dietrich noted as he tried to puzzle out the sequence of battle from the remaining traces. "They brought enough mechs to overrun this base. It took a while for them to crack open this barrier, but they came prepared."

With Lucky taking the lead, they entered what used to be a highly secure research complex. Different from the rest of the base, only the main corridor and a couple of chambers were large enough to accommodate mechs.

They swepted these giant chambers first. Everything had been swept clean. Only empty furniture and useless markings remained. Despite Lucky's best efforts, the cat failed to sniff out anything the scavengers had missed. Clearly the research labs was one of their main targets.

The Harrier bumped its feet against a wall. The lack of atmosphere dampened any noise, but the impact spread vibrations through the mech-sized chamber.

"I wonder what kind of research was done that requires this kind of elaborate setup." Dietrich idly wondered.

"Someone spent around five billion credits to set this place up." Ves estimated from what he saw. "The extravagant production lines alone points to a major commitment."

If a corporation wanted to mass produce a line of mechs, they were better off doing it open and above board.

After exploring the mech-sized chambers, Ves and Lucky proceeded to clear the smaller rooms alone. Dietrich remained in his cockpit in order to guard against major threats.

The remaining rooms differed little from their larger counterparts. Large amounts of servers, lab equipment and more had been completely swept away. The scavengers even dug out a couple of hidden stashes. Instead of feeling despondent at the sight, Ves found cause for hope.

"Another stash might be left." Ves informed his cat. "Go and take a sniff of these hollows. Perhaps you might encounter a similar smell."

Lucky hopped inside the hollowed-out stashes and memorized the smells. After an affirmative meow, the cat hopped back to the floor and slowly sauntered across the empty rooms.

The cat found one more possible stash. The cat indicated that a large, broken piece of machinery blocked the way to the potential treasure. This must have been the reason why the scavengers missed this find.

"How's it look like, Ves?"

"It's larger than the suspected safe we found at administration. My scanner tells me that there's a room-sized hollow hidden behind this wall. I found no traces of heat or energy so there shouldn't be a trap, but I can't tell for sure."

This final find marked the end of their exploration trip. Now they needed to decide how much longer they should stay and what to recover during that time.

Dietrich wanted to leave as fast as possible. "This place is creepy. If you tell me, we should empty the smuggler's cache first. It will only take half a day for the bots to load the goods into our ship."

"May I remind you that the Barracuda is my ship." Ves firmly asserted. It was important for him to remind his friend that he was in charge. "The broken Dortmunds are worth a thousand times more than a random collection of parts."

"Yeah, says you. It's all well-and-good for you to drool over a stupid printer, but even if you finally kludge something together, it only benefits you. I don't get anything out of this."

Ves did not want to argue too much with Dietrich. As the owner of the ship that brought them here, he should possess most of the rights to the salvage. He held back because he was armed with only a single pistol while Dietrich currently piloted a very deadly mech.

After a brief argument, the two hammered out a compromise.

They would stay as long as required for Ves to salvage the necessary Dortmund parts. Anything concerning the printer belonged solely to Ves.

After that, Ves would crack open the remaining two stashes. If he hadn't screwed up and triggered a self-destruct, they'd retrieve the treasures and split them up with Ves claiming eighty percent of their value while leaving Dietrich with the remaining twenty percent.

There was no guarantee that they'd get anything useful from the caches. Ves might also inadvertently trigger an alarm. In that case, they'd bug out as fast as possible and leave this star system.

The base still held a lot of value even after they emptied all of the caches. Dietrich had the option to turn in his twenty percent share for the sole right to exploit the ruins on behalf of Walter's Whalers.

Dietrich was confident that his father's gang would send a couple of transports to this star system and strip it down to the bone. This naturally included the smuggler's cache. Due to the Barracuda's limited cargo space, the ship did not have any room left after taking in the Dortmund parts and the Harrier.

The terms of the agreement heavily favored Ves. He was able to secure the prized Dortmund parts. As for Dietrich, as long as the base remained abandoned, he could earn massive amounts of credits from the remaining salvage.

The defenses, vault door and debris all consisted of high-quality alloys. Dietrich intended to get his gang to strip them down and melt the pieces in order to extract the exotic materials. The mech pilot estimated that the Whalers could earn as much as half a billion credits from the recovery effort.

"That's an optimistic assessment. You'll need a lot of ships to bring back the salvage. The defenses here are tough, so you'll also need a lot of time to break up this base."

The longer they lingered in this system, the greater the risk of discovery. Walter's Whalers had to invest in lots of transports and manpower to salvage the base. A major movement like that was bound to leak.

Dietrich didn't look worried. "If anyone comes looking for a fight, we'll kick their asses."

"If you say so." Ves shrugged. It was his problem to deal with. "Let's begin with the salvage operation."

Now that they've cleared the base, the Barracuda lifted off from the outskirts and approached the entrance of the base. After touching down, the cargo bay

opened up and released a small fleet of cargo handling bots along with a couple of observation bots.

Ves directed the observation bots to thoroughly scan the internals of all the Dortmunds. He tasked the cargo bots with collecting the loose junk scattered around the third floor.

Meanwhile, Dietrich patrolled the perimeter, making sure that no one sneaked up on their vulnerable operation. Lucky on the other hand ran off to feast on the many wrecks left behind.

While the observation bots did their work, Ves was not assured he could piece together a single functioning machine. "I should get a detailed schematic."

If Ves tried to reconstruct the Dortmund without preparation, he was bound to screw up. In order to assure the reconstructed machine worked properly, he had to get his hands on an official blueprint. He returned to the Barracuda and booted up his terminal. He searched for any leaks on the galactic net but came up empty.

"It's too good to be true if the blueprint of the latest Dortmund is leaked."

In the past, Ves would end his inquiry at this point. "I'm not a nobody anymore. I've got connections now."

Ves logged in to the Clifford Society. His virtual avatar spawned in the clouds. He looked down and located the city at the foot of the mountains. His form descended from above.

Once he landed on the streets, he walked to the market district and browsed every store. Many stores sold only mechs or designs relating to mechs. Only a couple of Squires sold equipment related to fabricating mechs, and none of them possessed any blueprints.

Just as Ves threw in the towel, he finally found a place that traded in blueprints. Surprisingly, a Knight opened up this storefront. Since the Knight was absent, the store only offered Ves a projection of a catalog.

The Knight sold hundreds of thousands of blueprints. Ves couldn't imagine how he was able to get his hands on so many detailed schematics.

For now, it didn't matter. Ves selected the 3D printer sub-category and found a listing of the Dortmund V3-B. The Knight charged only five merits for the blueprint along with a repair manual for internal use.

Ves instantly bought the files. Five merits was a lot for just a blueprint, especially considering that it was impossible to use an existing 3D printer to build another 3D printer.

The developers and manufacturers of these expensive machines weren't stupid. The last thing they wanted to see was someone printing their own printers at home. The commercial 3D printers available on the market were designed to incorporate many complex components that could never be printed into existence.

Therefore, these leaked and stolen blueprints were of little use. Only someone like Ves who managed to come across a pile of broken printers could make full use of these schematics.

Ves grinned once he exited the Society's virtual portal. With these plans in hand, he might be able to piece together a working industrial-class printer.

Chapter 113: Discoveries

The salvage operation proceeded on schedule. Ves downloaded a popular scavenger's app and loaded in the blueprint and the scans of the Dortmunds. Every time the observation bots scanned a section of the Dortmund, a section of the blueprint turned from red to green. A brighter color meant that there were more of those parts available.

In this way, Ves slowly found out whether his reconstruction effort was feasible.

At the end of the day, the entire blueprint turned green.

"There's enough working parts available!"

Whoever sabotaged the Dortmunds did a sloppy job. The mech was evidently in a hurry as each machine only endured a couple of sword attacks. The observation bots already marked out all of the green parts. With some careful disassembly Ves could retrieve them intact.

The only problem was that the blueprint radiated a couple of glaring red spots. Some consisted of inconsequential parts like the exterior casing or some unimportant cables. Others presented a bigger problem.

"I'll have to scavenge all of the broken parts and figure something out."

Having marked the additional parts, Ves began his disassembly. Despite his lack of experience, he made up for it with patience and focus. His recent augmentation left him with a steadier grip, which aided him in utilizing his tools with precision.

A Dortmund was a beast of a printer. If Ves did lack both a blueprint and a repair manual, he was liable to break something. The valuable information procured from the Society allowed him to avoid many pitfalls and handle the most important components with care.

The work proceeded slowly as Ves took care of the entire disassembly himself. None of the Barracuda's plentiful bots could help with this delicate operation. The best they could do was to bring them back to the ship and store them in secure containers freshly fabricated for this very purpose.

The entire operation lasted almost an entire week. Ves worked with excessive care, and this led to quite a few delays. His partner might have grumbled a

couple of times, but he dutifully patrolled the area with hardly any pause. Both of their nerves were fraught with tension.

When Ves sent off the last shipment of parts, he finally relaxed a little. "The most crucial part of this salvage operation is done."

The Barracuda already swelled with printer parts. While her cargo bay possessed enough space to accommodate them all, in order to leave enough room for the Harrier, Ves was forced to store them elsewhere. He repurposed the dormant compartments in the middle and upper decks as emergency storage rooms.

It made his ship a bit less safe, but Ves could deal with it. The Barracuda could not fit much more without throwing away some supplies.

"Let's go back to the bottom floor of this base and open up the final stashes."

Dietrich, Lucky and Ves all floated down the elevator shaft and reached the fourth underground floor. While Dietrich kept watch from the corridor inside his mech, Ves entered the marked out maintenance closet and prepared to crack open a suspected safe.

First, he removed the armored wall panels. Then, he cut through the structural composites that make up most of the walls. In order to avoid any disruptions, he used a more sophisticated plasma cutter from the Barracuda's inventory. After reaching close to the safe, he turned it off and chiseled off the rest of the wall with a specialized tool that kept vibrations to a minimum.

He eventually hollowed out a corridor to the front of the hidden object. It turned out to be a simple armored box rather than a fully featured safe.

"This must be a later addition. Whoever installed the box likely fabricated it with the materials on hand."

"That's a good thing, right?" Dietrich asked.

"The safe is made by an amateur, but it's still generating heat. I can't be too sure about what's inside. Let me take some scans."

While the sensor-blocking exterior hindered most of his efforts, the proximity made it easier for the multiscanner to return some readings.

"There's a trigger attached to the hinges. Any use of force will trigger some sort of mechanism that will ignite a block of flammable high-density fuel."

"Is there any way you can stop that from happening?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it." Ves replied as he churned his brain for solutions.

His Jury Rigging skill applied primarily to mechs, but it also came in handy in situations like this. He knew what type of fuel was inside. If he froze the section close to the fuel block, he could prevent its ignition even if he trigger went off. It might not be able to prevent anything else, but Ves was hopeful he could retrieve the contents.

He picked up a specialized freezing tool from the floor of the mech stables and got ready to freeze the flammable fuel block. He first dug out a wider channel to the top of the armored box. He pressed the semiflexible nozzle against the top and started the freezing process.

The box frosted over rapidly as the cold spread out quickly. After estimating that he'd done enough, he turned off the freezing tool and threw it aside. He quickly picked up a miniature plasma cutter and started cutting through the front of the safe.

He was racing against time. He had to finish cutting and retrieve the contents of the safe before the fuel block unfroze. Ves carefully operated the cutter in order to prevent its localized heat from spilling too far outward.

The box clanked as Ves successfully cut a hole in the front. He turned off the cutter and pulled away the circular piece. This time he covered his hands with a thick pair of gloves which he also borrowed from the deceased techs. With remarkable speed, he dug out a handful of objects that turned out to be a pile of data chips.

He finished the job by throwing in a prepared explosive before running outside. The blast ripped apart the entire wall setting. Ves deliberately strengthened the explosion in order to interrupt any other surprises. The scanners he placed around the closet failed to register any follow-ups. He was fairly certain it did not trigger any alarms.

"Are you certain no one has a clue we're here?" Dietrich asked again.

"The sensors and scanners that I have at my disposal are state-of-the-art. I haven't detected any outbound signals. I also haven't found any signs of an active quantum entanglement node."

The latter was difficult to stop, but those things were large, expensive and power hungry. They had to be in order to establish instant communication with the rest of the galaxy at a decent bandwidth. Ves suspected that the raiding force prioritized their destruction.

Before Ves tackled the larger stash, he wanted to take a look at the contents of the data chips he painstakingly retrieved. He grabbed a secure data pad and inserted one of the chips.

No viruses or hacks popped up when the data pad accessed the chip. To no one's surprise, he encountered nothing but encrypted files.

He had an answer for that. "Barracuda, please connect to this data pad and decrypt these files. Disable any precautions in the chip while you're at it."

His ship featured basic electronic warfare capabilities. By basic, it meant the systems paled in comparison to those installed by warships. Compared to the

dismal technological standard of a third-rate state, the Barracuda only took 4.7 seconds to decrypt all of the files. That was considered to be fairly slow for a modern corvette.

The data pad revealed reams of unlocked files. Ves opened up a document and briefly tried to make sense of it. He nodded and switched to another file, only to encounter something similar. When he removed the data chip and put in another one, he encountered the same sort of data.

"So what did you get? Top secret research? Some juicy intel?"

"Nope. Looks like we've stumbled upon a financial ledger. It logs all external transactions, from import to export. The amount of revenue this base has earned is astounding."

"So are our suspicions correct?"

"I can think of no other reason why this base is so circumspect. The massive profits from these sales is enough to make any medium-sized corporation lose their morals."

From the clues they gathered beforehand, they concluded that this facility was an illegal operation. Ves had also recovered some of the logs from the Dortmunds to support this verdict.

Ves gathered up the data chips and put them into a secure container. "This facility was setup to mass-produce unlicensed mechs. It's not difficult to get a hold of a couple of excellent designs without paying for the license. The real challenge consists of producing mechs from these pirated designs without getting caught by the MTA."

As the self-proclaimed regulators of the mech industry, the Mech Trade Association took a dim view on anyone who broke the rules. The MTA's dreaded Enforcement Division came down hard on anyone who violated the

rights of intellectual property holders. Forget about getting sued and sent to jail. The Division always went in guns blazing.

Any corporation who went ahead and still produced mechs had to be very circumspect. This was the reason why a base had been constructed in the middle of nowhere. The Barracuda only detected its presence due to the its fall. Otherwise, no scan should have been able to penetrate its camouflage.

"The files use specific codes to obscure the identity of this organization and its trading partners. It's very likely that the manufacturer shipped their mechs to pirates. Proof of that alone is enough to hang the entire corporation's board of directors."

Everyone hated pirates. Those who overtly supported their activities deserved no mercy. Due to the Komodo Star Sector's remoteness, the scourge of the galaxy was less of a threat in this region. Nevertheless, their mere presence endangered trade routes and depressed economic growth.

Dietrich expressed a lot of interest for the data chips. "This is great blackmail material. I know a data analyst who can make sense of these transactions. He'll be able to figure out which corporation is colluding with pirates."

"That's dangerous talk." Ves replied with caution. "Even if you figure out who has made a killing with this trade,

"Relax, I'm not stupid. Me and my boys might be small time, but I know just the place to sell the data chips. I can get you a lot of credits if you pass me the goods. We won't be able to earn as much if we don't do the blackmailing ourselves, but it's better to cut ties."

Due to the enormous risk involved with this transaction, Ves and Dietrich amended their agreement. They agreed to split their earnings fifty-fifty from the sale of the blackmail material.

Now that they handled the smaller stash, they got ready to crack open the larger one in the research department. Ves had high hopes for this stash due to its proximity to the labs.

His cargo bots already removed the debris blocking the wall. The unobstructed access allowed Ves to deploy his scanners closer to the suspected stash.

"There's a bathroom-sized space behind this wall. It's even better hidden than the previous stash due to the lack of any active systems. It's not leaking any signals or energy. That doesn't mean it's devoid of traps. I'll have to get closer in order to make sure."

Similar to last time, Ves methodically broke down the wall in front of him until he reached the sensor-blocking exterior of the hidden compartment. He removed a generous amount of material around the compartment and deployed his scanners almost right next to the surface.

His efforts picked up nothing that suggested any active systems. That still said nothing about any traps, but the likelihood of tripping anything decreased.

"It's a little suspicious, but the only way to find out is to crack this place open. Do you want to risk it?"

Despite their apprehension, both men were greedy for treasures. They already brought in a good haul. If they had to cut and run, they still earned a substantial profit.

Ves decided to crack it open directly without wasting too much time. He took a heavy duty plasma cutter and separated the vault door from the wall. A large hiss of air escaped from the enclosed chamber, causing his plasma cutter to sputter a bit. Once he created a large opening, he carefully sent an observation bot inside.

The two men kept their eyes peeled on their monitors. When the observation bot illuminated the interior, they both looked up in surprise.

"Those are dead bodies."

Besides a large stack of boxes, the compartment held three different corpses. They all wore the standard white lab coats that revealed their former status as researchers. The most notable observation about their state was that none of them wore any vacuum-sealed suits.

Dietrich figured out the story from the awful state of their bodies. "They suffocated when they expended all of their oxygen. This stash is just a place to hide some valuables. It isn't meant to be a panic room."

No air, no food, no water. The researchers never stood a chance of survival. Even if they wanted to surrender, they likely couldn't exit the compartment due to the debris blocking their exit. The blockage also prevented the scavengers from discovering their bodies.

"It's an awful way to die. The least we can do is bury their bodies with respect."

Ves tasked a couple of cargo bots to carefully bring the bodies up to the surface. He tasked some other bots with digging a couple of graves. Before he let the bots take away the bodies, he searched their clothes and removed all their comms and other possessions.

When he studied the comms, he knew he couldn't get anything out of them. These models were provided by the lab themselves, and came with a host of security features. In the event of their owner's death, they automatically wiped the memory chips and fried them into melted slag.

The large boxes turned out to store the components of a disassembled weapon. Surprisingly, Dietrich was the first to recognize the weapon.

"It's a mech-sized laser rifle, but it looks a little weird. Certain parts look larger than others. It's not a regular rifle for sure."

If the boxes contained parts, then they should also include a schematic. Ves did a little digging and finally found a couple of data chips inside a smaller box.

The decryption proceeded slowly. The lab put a lot more effort into protecting the contents of these chips. Despite this setback, the encryption method was dated, and stood no chance against the might of the Barracuda's electronic warfare module.

When Ves took a peek at the files, he found a couple of schematics along with lots of notes documenting the lab's developments. The logs included in the data chip spanned a period of three months.

Once Ves opened up a schematic, he finally got to know why this lab operated off-the-books.

"The researchers were developing a graser rifle. No, they already developed a working model. According to this schematic, they were working on their third iteration."

Dietrich banged his fist against his cockpit. If the MTA found out that they recovered the schematics of a viable graser rifle, they could get in a lot of trouble.

A graser stood short for gamma ray laser. Grasers could be considered as the hyperactive offshoot of a regular laser. A graser beam fared poorly in most atmospheric conditions due to their tendency to ignite air into plasma.

A graser had a number of special attributes that made the MTA take a dim view on this weapon type.

First, they packed a ridiculous amount of energy. A mech-grade graser consumed a substantial amount of power in order to make them practical on the battlefield. A graser beam passed right through obstacles or blew them up if it came across something dense.

The more insidious use of a graser was to take advantage of its penetrative properties. A strong enough graser always succeeded in passing some of its gamma rays through an obstacle. Grasers were capable of irradiating people who thought themselves safe inside the cockpit of a mech.

It only took a fraction of the energy emitted by a graser to consign a human being to death. Anyone who received a lethal dose of radiation in this manner had little chance of survival unless they had access to superior medical services. Only the best hospitals were equipped to respond to radiation poisoning.

Ves was certain this base developed and sold the graser rifles to pirates. In turn, the pirates used the graser rifles as a convenient means to irradiate the crew of a spaceship. This killed off the people but left the goods intact.

Certainly, the pirates had to clean up the residual radiation. This was not a big problem as gamma rays were not as bad as alpha or beta rays in that regard.

In short, Ves could not make use of this research, let alone attempt to sell it. Producing pirated mechs was one thing. Producing an outlawed weapon was an entirely different matter.

"Let's destroy the disassembled rifle." Ves suggested after a moment's consideration. "It's a bad idea to get involved. Let's not even mention taboo weapons when you sell the blackmail material."

Dietrich paused in his Harrier as he weighed the benefits in his head. "You haven't mentioned what you will do with the files you recovered. Are you thinking about keeping them?"

"Yes. I know it might doom me, but I can't let go of this valuable collection of research." Ves replied with hunger in his eyes. "Before you call the MTA, let me assure you that I have no intention of breaking any taboos. I can use the data to increase my understanding of conventional laser weapons."

Ves was playing with fire, they both knew it. Perhaps Dietrich didn't care, but he only objected briefly before he turned his thoughts to other matters.

The fact that Dietrich knew Ves kept the research gave the pilot some leverage. Any time he felt like it, he could report Ves to the MTA, or hold it over his head as blackmail.

What Dietrich didn't know was that Ves intended to transfer all of the files to the Mech Designer System. With the System's recent upgrade, it gained the capability to camouflage its programming so that it would look like a harmless designer app. Even the MTA couldn't do anything to Ves if they lacked compelling evidence.

For now, Ves didn't expect their relationship to deteriorate. The journey brought them closer and the earnings from this trip alone was enough to satisfy the pilot.

"Let's pack up and go home."

Chapter 114: Pursuit

Lading with treasures, the Barracuda exited the lifeless star system and followed the route back home. Both Ves and Dietrich were satisfied with their gains. Lucky was content with the promise of food and went back to chewing Master Olson's gift.

During the rest of the trip, Ves went back to improving his Physics and Electrical Engineering skills. The Society's Star Library offered many books that Ves could borrow for free. He liberally made use of this privilege to rapidly expand his knowledge base.

In order to puzzle a Dortmund back together, it was essential that he knew what he was dealing with. Improving his Electrical Engineering skill helped him in making sense of the Dortmund's blueprint. This allowed him to refine his tentative reconstruction plan and avoid some elementary mistakes.

Shortly after he upgraded both skills to Apprentice-level, the ship sounded an alarm. Ves immediately shut down the projection of the Dortmund's blueprint and raced down to the bridge. Lucky and Dietrich arrived seconds later.

"What's up Ves?" Dietrich asked as he scratched his loose blond hair. "I thought this was supposed to be a lightly inhabited system."

"Lightly inhabited or not, but the Barracuda detected a lot of dormant engine signatures coming to life."

The Barracuda arrived at the edge of this system only fifteen minutes earlier. The coordinated response that followed their entry originated from a nearby asteroid belt.

"The ships are refusing to respond to our hails." Ves stated grimly. "It's safe to say they aren't coming with good intention."

"Pirates." Dietrich spat. Normally, he enjoyed a scrap or two, but the ships and mechs they carried grossly outnumbered them. "Is there any way we can get away without a fight?"

Ves seated himself behind a console and ran the numbers. "Assuming that the pirate vessels are accelerating at their maximum rate, they won't be able to catch up to us if we start running. My ship is a lot faster than theirs."

Ves ordered the Barracuda to flip around and run past the edge of the star system. Her engines started boosting with substantial power. As a modern corvette, his ship was capable of outperforming any rustbucket in the hands of scum.

"These pirates are rather tricky. Even with our engine superiority, we don't have much of a lead. The pirate vessels already followed a ballistic trajectory before our arrival."

"What does that mean?"

"That means that the pirates have a running start. If my ship is just a standard third-rate corvette, then they might be able to overtake our ship before we can transition into FTL."

The Barracuda's FTL engine only took two hours to finish its cycling process. A regular corvette might take at least three hours to do the same.

"The pirates shouldn't be aware of this discrepancy. While they are still thinking of getting close, we'll already be waving them goodbye."

Even as he explained their situation, Ves was not quite reassured. As a mech designer, he knew very little about ships. For example, the pirate vessels might be keeping powerful short-range boosters in reserve.

He also had to consider their mech contingent. "With the relative speeds we are working with, there's no chance the pirate ships can catch up if they aren't hiding any surprises. What we'll likely see is mechs joining the pursuit."

"The ships won't be able to catch up to us, right? What about their mechs?"

Ves inputted some new numbers to the calculator. "We don't have to worry about medium mechs or heavier. The only light mechs stand a chance of overtaking the Barracuda, and that's only when they are geared for speed."

This was good news. They could disregard most of the hardware and focus on fending off the light mechs. While the amount of speed-focused light mechs in pursuit was still up in the air, Ves doubted he'd face more than half-a-dozen of them. A pirate gang of this size shouldn't be carrying too many light mechs.

"Haha, if those flies want to catch up, then they'll be easy targets!" Dietrich exclaimed once he realized he only had to deal with a handful of chasing light mechs. "I finally get to put my marksmanship to good use!"

The situation at the moment devolved in a slow and drawn-out chase. The sensor plot showed that the Barracuda was vastly outnumbered, but if the ship could keep her systems running, she could make it out of the system.

The key was to stall the impending light mechs without sustaining damage. The Barracuda was a corvette, which meant it mainly focused on speed. Her designers never prioritized her armor.

A concentrated barrage by a couple of pursuing mechs could easily damage her vulnerable rear. Ves and Dietrich wanted to prevent a situation where the corvette was forced to stop accelerating due to suffering too much damage. If the pirates manage to inflict critical damage on the thrusters, then the Barracuda would be hamstrung.

Both men descended onto the hangar bay. Dietrich entered the cockpit and optimized his Harrier's settings for deep space action. He already had some experience with fighting in zero gravity.

Meanwhile, Ves ran some checks over the Harrier's exterior and made sure the aerial mech performed up to spec in vacuum. There were many nuances involved in space combat. Ves only scratched the surface in this area. He applied only a limited amount of fixes.

Lucky remained at his owner's side. As a gem cat, his role in the upcoming battle was to keep Ves safe. As the ship's chief security officer, Lucky did not appreciate being taken away from his favorite food.

Due to its extensive rework back in Leemar, the Harrier was in its best shape in years. Ves had already inspected the mech a few weeks ago, so the mech was structurally sound.

"There's nothing else I can do for your mech." Ves finally said as he pulled back from the mech. "I'll return to the bridge and manage the ship from the captain's seat. Good luck."

The Harrier gently slapped the butt of its ballistic rifle. "Hah! I'll be back in no time! Just make sure I still have a ship to return to!"

Ves left the cargo bay with Lucky in tow and returned to the middle deck. After reaching the bridge, he forced the navigator bot off the captain's chair and claimed the seat for himself. He summoned a projection of the pirates and studied them in detail.

The corvettes and light transports in pursuit looked ramshackle. A lack of maintenance and patchwork repairs gave Ves the mistaken impression that these vessels were about to fall apart. In truth, the pirate ships exhibited lots of creative engineering. Most of the ships in pursuit sported additional thrusters that gave them an extra kick.

"These aren't professional mercenaries moonlighting as pirates." Ves informed Dietrich over the comm after scanning each ship's construction. Their quality fell short, which indicated that this gang lacked access to a legitimate market. "They aren't well-funded either if the ships are only capable of accelerating so much."

A speaker flared to life as Dietrich connected to the bridge. "How many mechs are they carrying?"

"They've only brought five light transports which they are likely using as mech carriers. They should each have space for about four to six mechs, so they've brought thirty mechs at maximum."

Only a couple of them were speed-focused light mechs, but the numbers still mattered if the ship suffered a slowdown.

Ves was able to guess the pirate gang's origin from this information. "These are regional pirates. I don't think anyone is supporting them from behind, much less someone I've offended at Leemar. Those snobs are well aware of the Arkon Mark I's amazing specs. Any force they send in my way should at least include faster ships."

"They could be sent by the shady corporation which used to sell those graser rifles we found."

"I don't think so. If they assumed we're aware of their illicit dealings, then they should have thrown more pirates at us. CEOs with a guilty conscience have a habit of overreacting when someone finds out they've broken one of the big taboos."

"I guess we'll know for sure once the mechs show up. If they're armed with grasers, we're screwed."

Ves believed that wasn't the case. They just happen to bump into a random pirate fleet by sheer dumb luck. They seemed to be everywhere you least expected them. That they happened to lay in wait right next to the Barracuda's emergence from FTL could be attributed to chance.

Due to the nature of space, it was impossible to eradicate the scourge of piracy. The rats fled to the vast space between star systems each time someone in power wanted to wipe them out.

His console beeped an alert. The pirates finally hailed his ship.

Ves had no idea what to expect when the pirate captain came into view. The interior of his grimy bridge had seen better days. The mech designer even detected patches of mold, something which should horrify any decent engineer.

"Eh? Who are you kid?" The bearded pirate asked as he scratched his scarred face. "I don't have time to play with juniors! Get your captain on the line right now!"

"My name is Ves Larkinson. You are speaking to the captain and the owner of the Barracuda."

"You?!" The pirate took a good look at the Barracuda's bridge. "Oh I see, you're one of those rich brats gallivanting in the big bad universe. Well, let your granddaddy teach you a lesson how you're supposed to react to the Astral Wolves. First, shut off your blasted engines right this instant!"

Ves hyped up his own status in order to stiffen his nerves and hopefully deter the pirates. "The likes of you don't have the right to order me around. Have you watched the news lately? Do you know who I am? I am the apprentice of Master Carmin Olson. A Master Mech Designer from the Friday Coalition. Touch me and you won't even know when you will die."

His relative youth and shaking voice betrayed his lack of experience.

"Hahahaha! Look at the little brat calling out for his parents! Well, granddaddy is here and I'll be sure to comfort you. So you're one of those nerdy mech designers, huh? I could use a new one after I splattered the brains of my last one!"

The pirate captain kept laughing like a pig and cut the connection. Lawless pirates truly feared no threats. Their confidence came from their ability scurry back to the depths of interstellar space where the nearest star was light-years away. No conventional force could track them down.

Only the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance possessed the technology to track down these rats. In practice, neither organizations bothered to chase after petty criminals. They only roused their mighty fleets and mechs once someone violated one of the big taboos.

The Astral Wolves launched their spaceborn mechs once the pirate transports came close enough to the Barracuda. Twenty-seven mechs appeared all at once and rocketed forward.

Mechs optimized for space usually incorporated powerful flight systems. While they could not compare to a spaceship in endurance, their relatively high thrust-to-mass ratio allowed them to sprint short distances as long as their fuel and heat capacity lasted.

The pursuing pirate mechs separated in two different groups. The majority consisted of slower mechs in for the long haul. Despite the distance, those armed with lasers started to fire at the Barracuda.

Due to the distance, the mech's vibrations and the inherent flaws of their weapons, the laser beams weren't able to hit the fleeing corvette. Yet as long as they kept firing their lasers, they might get a lucky hit.

"Our ride is under fire!"

"At this range they're barely able to hit us." Ves reassured Dietrich, though he squeezed his fist in frustration. "Our corvette can't withstand a sustained attack, but it hasn't gotten to that point yet. Ignore the lasers for now."

Since Dietrich's Harrier carried a ballistic rifle, he wasn't able to retaliate. As lightspeed weapons, lasers were able to attack at very extreme ranges out in the vacuum of space. Projectile weapons lost their effectiveness due to their relatively placid muzzle velocity.

"It's a shame we don't have a railgun or gauss rifle."

These kinds of advanced projectile weapons packed a formidable amount of punch and muzzle velocity. They were a lot more expensive than conventional weapons due to their high power consumption and their strict material needs. Even second-rate states employed these weapons occasionally.

Ves stuck to the plan for now. He saw five brilliant flares of light gaining in on his ship. He knew they represented the light mechs that formed the actual threat. There was no need to sortie Dietrich early and let his Harrier build up its heat in vain.

Now that the pirates revealed their full capabilities, Ves updated his model and gained some additional numbers.

"Dietrich, if the light mechs maintain their current speed, they'll reach extreme effective range in about half an hour. All we need is twenty-three minutes! Don't let them get land an attack on my ship!"

"That's too long! I can fend them off for about ten minutes, but I'll run out of magazines sooner or later. I need to go back and resupply at least once."

"That will endanger the ship. The cargo bay's hatch is placed at the bottom aft of the ship. Once I open it, a single laser can devastate the valuable Dortmund parts I've stashed in there!"

"Unless you can speed up your ship, there's no other choice. Either your printer goes down or we lose the entire ship!"

The pirate attack put all of their gains at risk. The Barracuda's spare rooms were already stuffed with plundered parts, though the cargo bay held the majority of the spoils. Ves stored them in simple boxes secured to the deck with reinforced cables. It was only one step up from leaving them in a messy pile.

Eventually, Ves was forced to relent and prepared additional reloads for the Harrier's ballistic rifle. Without the Harrier's deterrent, the light mechs would be free to take potshots at his ship.

Shortly after, the pirates managed to score their first hit. The laser beam only happened to scorch a rear panel of the Barracuda, but more was yet to come.

"Navigator bot, please start start dodging!"

The Barracuda adjusted her course. Instead of flying straight, she started weaving in four directions. This threw off the predictive targeting of the pirates, forcing them to work a little harder in achieving a hit.

Ves hoped he bought enough time for his ship.

Chapter 115: Astral Wolves

One of the worst dangers an interstellar ship has to deal with is pirates. Space was big, so the chances of bumping into them should be negligible.

In reality, pirate fleets worked together with observers stationed in neighboring star systems. They observed all traffic going in and out, and whenever a ship intended to transition to the pirate fleet's system, they informed their masters through the galactic net. This allowed the pirate fleet at the other end to prepare a reception for their unsuspecting victims.

This didn't always work due to the inherent uncertainties involved with FTL travel. Sometimes, the arriving ships ended up millions of kilometers away from the pirates.

Considering the odds, Ves could have ended up worse. The Astral Wolves accurately plotted his destination and even took the telemetry from their observer to predict his entry point in this remote star system. The trick with the running start further emphasized the capabilities of his pursuers.

"We're not dealing with amateurs here. These Wolves are seasoned robbers. I don't believe we've seen the full extent of their moves."

The aft of the Barracuda was taking a beating. The enemy pilots appeared to adjust to the circumstances and increased their fire rate to the maximum sustainable limit. While this did no favors to their accuracy, the sheer volume of fire inevitably worked their charm.

The odds of throwing a dice and getting a six was small. The pirates knew that, so they threw the dice faster.

Nothing in the Barracuda's arsenal could slow them down or mitigate their shots. While ships operating inside human space were not allowed to carry weapons, Ves wished his ship came with several defense measures such as security screens or after boosters. Even if they used up a horrible amount of energy, it was better than letting pirates get their hands on his ship.

As the clock ran down, his ship accumulated more stress. The Barracuda held on so far due to boasting thick armor. No matter the ship, even a heavy mech paled in comparison to the amount of absolute protection they enjoyed. This was the intrinsic difference between a bipedal war machine and a self-contained ecosystem built to traverse the stars.

Still, there were limits to a spaceship's integrity. While the long-ranged laser fire wasn't capable of dealing critical damage due to their wide dispersal, they softened up the Barracuda's aft section. If the light mechs came into range and were allowed to focus their fire, the ship could easily suffer an engine breakdown.

Ves desperately tried to figure out what he could do to repel the pirates from his end, but came up short. His ship was essentially a glorified pleasure yacht, a souped up sports shuttle with interstellar range.

"Three minutes to go until the light mechs are in range. Are you ready to swat some flies?"

"I've been ready ever since we arrived at this stupid star system."

"Good. I'm opening up the cargo bay hatch in thirty seconds. Please sortie out as fast as possible. I don't want to expose the interior any longer than necessary."

Dietrich wasn't looking forward to the upcoming fight. His Harrier worked best as mobile fire support and normally relied on studier mechs to hold the line. He did not look forward to trying to defend his buddy's ship while outnumbered five-to-one.

The mech designer might think himself clever for navigating through remote and inhabited star system, but it came to bite them back with a vengeance.

Now the mech pilot had to clean up after the mess. Fortunately his Harrier received an extensive overhaul back in Leemar. His mech might not be able to exceed its specifications, but it wouldn't fall apart from under him after receiving a couple of shots.

"I'm depressurizing the cargo bay. Get ready!"

The air disappeared from the chamber before the imminent opening. Letting all of the air escape from the ship when the hatch slid down was not only wasteful, but also dangerous.

"Ten seconds left!"

With just seconds to go, Dietrich grumbled about his friend's propensity to stumble into pirate attacks. This was the second time they encountered one so far, and they only made a single round trip! It shouldn't be so easy to bump into pirates!

The hatch slid open once the ventilators completely sucked away the air. A black expanse of stars came into view. Dietrich suppressed his instinct to admire the view and flew out of the ship in an instant.

The hatch closed behind him as he positioned his mech below of the constantly accelerating Barracuda. The Harrier had to adopt an awkward horizontal posture with its rifle pressed against its torso in order to keep up with the ship. The mech's modest flight system kept up with the corvette for now.

"What the hell?! You could have mentioned the rain of laser beams!"

"Relax. It's not as bad as it looks like. If you manage to draw away their fire, then that would be best. You're a much smaller target so you'll make a great decoy!"

Some of the distant mechs indeed shifted their aim to the Harrier. Dietrich already introduced some randomness in his flight path in order to cope with the barrage. Ves might had a point about their accuracy, but the pilot took no chances.

He already kept his eye on the approaching light mechs. Their flight systems flared up as bright as a star as they expended substantial amounts of energy or fuel to catch up to their fleeing prey. Detachable radiator panels extended from their backs in order to cope with their enormous heat generation.

The pirate mechs unleashed their weapons once they passed a certain threshold. A light volley of solid kinetic projectiles and explosive shells impacted the Barracuda's vulnerable rear.

"Dietrich! We just suffered as much damage as five minutes of sporadic laser fire! We'll only last a couple of minutes if this keeps up! Get them off my back!"

The pilot didn't need his partner's nagging to know what to do. He already engaged his sharpshooting module and prepared to fire on all five mechs.

He shot a volley of three projectiles at the closest aerial mech. The pirate panicked at the incoming kinetic slugs even though they did not land anywhere close to the target.

Dietrich already shifted his aim. His rifle barked another two shots at a see-sawing mech. The pirate's lazy and predictable dodging pattern allowed the young pilot to land a glancing shot at its legs. While the damage was negligible, it frightened the pirate into pulling back.

He sent a couple of shots in the direction of the other three mechs in turn. All of them paused their aggression in order to regain their composure. He succeeded in halting their relentless assault and disrupted their efforts to cripple the Barracuda.

The Astral Wolves adjusted their strategy. The distant medium mechs maintained their fire on the Barracuda. They were confident it was only a matter of time before the lasers crippled the ship.

As for the light mechs, they split their attention. Two of them kept up their fire against the Barracuda while the other three shifted their targeting systems to the Harrier. Dietrich had to overload his flight system in order to keep his hide intact.

"You're doing a great job, but it's not enough. Get the other two mechs off my tail!"

"I'm kind of busy here Ves!" The pilot spat back as he worked his controls. He increased his rate of fire in order to keep the enemy mechs on their toes.

"How's the ship?"

"Her engine nozzles are accumulating too much heat! The shells landing on her hull is isn't helping either."

In the meantime, the Harrier only suffered from scratches and glancing blows so far due to the deplorable skill level of the pirates.

The typical scum who resort to piracy didn't have much choice. Even if they were potentates, their neural aptitudes ranked near the bottom. No decent mercenary corps was desperate enough to offer them a place in their ranks.

A potentate often grew up with an inflated sense of importance. Those with disappointing aptitudes, lazy work ethics or severe attitude problems might not be resigned to living life as a norm. Why respect the laws that held them back when they could use force to indulge in their desires?

Hedonists and degenerates like these never spent much time in polishing their skills. Even as he came under constant fire, Dietrich adopted a dodging pattern that worked well against riflemen who relied too much on their targeting systems. It decreased the odds of getting hit, but the irregular movements also affected his marksmanship.

He ignored the mechs who shot at him and instead fired at the machines who persisted in harassing the Barracuda. One or two shots hardly worked, so Dietrich increased his fire rate in order to put more pressure on the persistent bastards. His ammunition depleted at an alarming rate, but the pilot had no choice.

He achieved his first breakthrough almost accidentally. He shot a casual volley at the furthest light mech, intending to scare it back before shifting his attention to another opponent. By some coincidence, two slugs managed to hit the unsuspecting mech square in the center.

The stricken mech's breakneck speed worked against its favor by amplifying the damage. One slug crunched right through the frontal armor, crushing the flimsy plates. The second slug that followed after landed close enough to slip through the cracks and apart its sides.

To Dietrich's regret, his shots failed to disable the mech, though it halted its chase. The damaged mech sputtered as its flight system lost power. Whether the mech actually lost power or the pilot simply lost his nerve, nobody knew. In any case, it made Dietrich's job easier.

The pirates responded by firing missiles. Over fifty individual missiles launched from the medium mechs which held back so far. Due to the need to chase and catch up to the Barracuda, the missiles weren't actually travelling very fast. They still presented a very real threat.

"Those missiles need to be shot down!"

"There's too many missiles." Dietrich growled as he kept distracting the light mechs, who flew much more circumspect at the sudden loss of a fellow pirate.

"Then empty your magazines if you have to. Those missiles are not only high explosive, they're also capable of homing in on a specific section of my ship. If you ask me, I'd rather get shot at by pirates who failed their marksmanship class than let those homing missiles chew up my thrusters!"

Dietrich faced a difficult choice. If he relented on the light mechs, they might recover their poise and begin to fight back more aggressively. Still, Ves had a point about the missiles. The mech pilot lamented that his mech lacked the capacity to incorporate a machine gun that was perfect for anti-missile duty.

He shifted his targeting settings and started to fire mech-sized slugs at the missiles. Despite their nimbleness, the homing projectiles had to swim against the current so to speak, which allowed Dietrich to land most of his shots.

While the Harrier methodically destroyed the missile swarm, the other mechs grew bold and focused their fire on the ship again. The pilot couldn't do anything about their opportunistic attacks besides speeding up the destruction of the missiles.

Once he intercepted the last missiles, the Harrier flew back to the ship. "Open up Ves! I need a resupply!"

The battered hatch lowered quicker than normal. Ves had overridden the safety protocols. The Harrier flew back inside even as sporadic shots landed close to the vulnerable opening. One laser managed to scorch the interior bulkhead of the ship before the hatch closed up again.

Ves tiredly spoke again from the bridge. "I need you back out of there as fast as possible. The aft section is almost out of armor and the thrusters aren't looking too good either."

"I know! I'm doing the best I can already." Dietrich replied as he quickly shook off his spent magazines. The empty cases landed onto the deck with a soundless thud due to the absence of air.

Midway through the resupply, the Barracuda shuddered for a second.

"What's that?"

"That's the result of a malfunctioning thruster! I've forced the faulty component to keep working, but it won't do any favors for its longevity. Get back out there please!"

Dietrich didn't bother with picking up the last magazines. "Open the hatch. I'm going out!"

The Harrier exited the hatch and fired aggressively at the pursuing pirates. He changed his strategy. His previous act of suppressing all of the mechs at the same time did not do much in deterring them. Only when he disabled a mech did the enemy pilots pull back a bit.

"You guys want to see blood? Then let me show you what this Whaler can do."

Chapter 116: Distance

With about ten minutes left to go before the FTL drive finished cycling, the pirates already came close to immobilizing their prey. Though unaware that the Barracuda was able to jump in just two hours after arriving at the star system, their ceaseless aggression made it clear these pirates were out for blood.

The passage of time allowed the light mechs to close the distance to their prey. Their mechs were at the brink of overheating, but their pilots exerted enough control to stay under the limit. Their awful accuracy improved quite a bit now that their target grew bigger on their targeting screens.

"You're not the only pilots who benefit from this ship." Dietrich muttered with a focused snarl. "I've taken a lot of crap from you guys. It's time for payback."

Dietrich specialized in both aerial maneuvering and marksmanship. Armed with a ballistic rifle, he excelled in picking off enemy mechs from medium range. Now that his main targets approached his optimal range, he could finally dish out the hurt.

Taking advantage of their lack of attention on him, Dietrich took his time and aimed at the nearest light mech. He calmly lined up his shots and released three kinetic slugs in succession.

His aim held true. The first kinetic slug glanced off the light mech's arm, stripping a decent chunk of armor plating. The following round flew past the mech's head, missing it entirely. The third one accidentally crashed against the rifle's stock, tearing the weapon from the still-reacting mech's hands.

The weapon helplessly flew off into deep space, leaving the lightly armored mech with no means to continue the fight. Like the Harrier, the pirate mech only carried one main weapon in order to save weight.

Realizing his predicament, the pilot of the disarmed mech pulled back and tried to join the second wave following from behind. He wanted to borrow a spare weapon from his comrades in order to resume the chase.

"Two down, three to go."

The sudden attack left the remaining light mechs stunned. They hesitated for a couple of seconds before focusing their attacks on the Harrier. In their eyes, the toothless Barracuda was a sitting duck they could slaughter at their leisure.

Ves encouragingly praised Dietrich's performance. "Whatever you're doing, keep it up! The integrity of the thrusters have reached a critical point. They're

resistant to heat so the lasers don't bother them much, but they absolutely can't take any more shells."

"How much longer do I have to stall them?"

"Seven minutes! We're almost home!"

Those seven minutes were hard fought. Dietrich duelled with the three mechs. Due to his recent resupply, he liberally emptied his magazines like a drunkard binging at the bar. Previously, he had to take his time to line up his shots. Not anymore. He bracketed his target in an inescapable net of projectiles. No matter where the hapless pirate dodged, he couldn't escape.

To his credit, the pilot of the light mech spun around and let its relatively useless feet take the impact. Dietrich commended the pirate's split-second decision making even as he realized he was dealing with a tough cookie.

"Fine, I'll leave you for last."

For now, he had to remove as much sources of danger as possible. Even as his mech shook from the increasingly accurate incoming shots, he trusted his Harrier to hold together. Unlike the flimsy light mechs in front of him, his mech boasted actual armor.

In contrast, his immediate opponents emphasized speed at the cost of both armor and firepower. Their ballistic rifles only shot juvenile versions of what his own weapon unleashed. Despite being outnumbered, Dietrich leveraged his advantages in such a dominant way that the remaining light mechs stood no chance.

Like the flies they represented, Dietrich swatted them out of contention with only a bit of effort. It took a generous amount of kinetic slugs, but he inflicted serious damage to the flight systems of two of them. The remaining pirate decisively gave up once he stood alone and pulled back to join his mates.

"Yeah! Run away you coward!" Dietrich yelled as he realized he successfully beat back the pirates and saved his friend's ship from certain doom. They came with five but none made it to the end. "I am the best!"

The Astral Wolves obviously hadn't given up. They merely stopped throwing mechs at a closer range where the Harrier held all the advantages. The constant laser fire from the extremely distant medium mechs never ceased. While the Barracuda had been built to withstand a lot of heat, the cracks in her hull did not bode well for the ship.

"Get back to the ship." Ves commanded from the bridge, breaking Dietrich's high. "We're jumping out in two minutes."

"Roger that."

Now that Dietrich turned around, he finally saw how close they made it past this hurdle. The light mechs had done a number on the aft section. Their light projectiles might not pack a punch, but against a target as large as a ship, they chewed up the armor like a swarm of a thousand bees. The plating was marred by so many pits and holes that it resembled the surface of a barren moon.

"Is the ship still functional?" He idly questioned as he quickly snuck his mech inside the opened hatch.

"Whoever designed the Arkon class deserves a lot of credit. They've incorporated an ingenious buffer layout that mitigates any damage that goes past the armor belt. All our critical systems besides the thrusters are intact."

The damage to the thrusters was severe, but it mattered little when Ves spooled up the FTL drive. Engaging the drive immediately after finishing the cycle degraded its hardware, but nobody cared about maintenance problems right now.

The pirate vessels detected the unique fluctuations coming out of their prey. With impotent rage, the Astral Wolves had no means of preventing the corvette's escape. With a swirling whoosh, the ship transitioned into an entirely different mode of existence.

The Barracuda finally let go of her highest alert state. Repair bots of all kinds scurried out of their holes and patched up whatever internal damage the ship received.

Air returned inside the cargo bay as Dietrich slowly shut down his battered mech. Due to maintaining a flat fighting posture in the previous battle, the Harrier's legs blocked most of the incoming fire. The damage was so severe that the mech could not stand on its own two feet anymore under standard gravity conditions.

With no other choice, Dietrich awkwardly collapsed the mech to a sitting position. He made sure to avoid bumping into the the boxes strapped down to the deck.

He met Ves when he exited the cockpit. Sweat suffused his entire body though his pilot suit absorbed most of the moisture. There was nothing like snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.

"You fought good." Ves congratulated him even as he stared at his Harrier's wretched state. "We'll have to pay for the bills, but we could have lost it all."

"Ves?"

"Yes Dietrich?"

"You owe me a mech."

"Hey, I'm the one who invited you to this trip." Ves immediately responded with his palms held up. "I'll cover your repair costs but I'm not in the position to

gift you a new mech. Besides, I'm not capable of designing a rifleman mech at this moment."

"Tch, I don't need your money to fix my mech. I can easily cover the cost once I send my dad to the abandoned base. No, I want you to personally build a mech for me. I can wait for it, but you better deliver. Don't forget who saved your billion col ship."

The blond mech pilot had a point. Ves eventually promised to tailor a mech for him once he had the means. If Dietrich's gang got a good haul from stripping the underground base, then he'd even cover the cost. It was an equitable arrangement for both men.

After Dietrich left for the showers, Ves looked at the Harrier once again and sighed. "We've really cut it close. I'm lucky to have brought you along. The galaxy is a lot more dangerous than I thought. I won't be making the same mistake twice."

The Barracuda sustained no damage to her FTL drive, so the remaining leg of the journey occurred without glitches or breakdowns. Ves made sure to inspect each of her systems in person, but there was only so much a mech designer like him could understand.

Ves stroked his chin with his palm as he gazed at the damage report. His ship got off lightly, all considered. She lost very little functionality and could still be used to traverse the stars.

The bad news came when Ves considered how much it cost to fix the damage. The Barracuda used a proprietary armor plating system that could only be produced at the most advanced production facilities back in the Friday Coalition.

If Ves wanted to fix the holes in his ship, he'd have to leave her at a repair yard and arrange imports of most of the exclusive materials. The total cost amounted to at least twenty million credits.

For now, he couldn't spare the money to repair a ship that wasn't essential to his daily operations. Better to leave the ship behind and focus on building his core business first. He planned to revisit the matter of repairs once he enhanced his earnings.

After making sure his ship wasn't about to fall apart, Ves went back to his studies. He only had a limited amount of time and he wanted to hit the ground running once he arrived at his workshop.

The recent attack once more reinforced how easy it was for him to die. Without strength, one had no right to speak. Even a mech designer was able to accrue power if everyone wanted you to design their mechs. His first priority was to advance his skills.

His latest brush of death pushed Ves to accelerate his learning. He wanted to advance his Electrical Engineering and Physics skills to Apprentice-level with just weeks to go. In order to keep up with his brutal schedule, he kept his daily interaction with Dietrich and Lucky to a minimum.

Fortunately, both cat and pilot had other concerns in mind. Lucky almost finished gnawing Master Olson's ore. When Ves stroked his gem cat's back, he always got the feeling he was touching an overstuffed energy cell.

Meanwhile, Dietrich helped plan his father's upcoming salvage expedition. Walter's Whalers were already in the process of commissioning a convoy of transports and corvettes.

By the time the Barracuda transitioned into the Bentheim system, Ves finished upgrading both of his targeted skills. The improvements bolstered his fundamental mech design skills by plugging his weaknesses.

They also eased his attempt to reconstruct the Dortmund. The new insights he received from his studies allowed him to understand the blueprint and repair manual a little better. He understood some of the subtler nuances of the 3D printer's design.

"Alright System. Show me my Status."

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 1307

Attributes

Strength: 0.8

Dexterity: 0.7

Endurance: 0.8

Intelligence: 1.3

Creativity: 1

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Apprentice - [3D Printer Proficiency II] [Assembler Proficiency II]

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Apprentice

[Mathematics]: Apprentice

[Mechanics]: Journeyman - [Jury Rigging II] [Speed Tuning III]

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression I]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

[Physics]: Apprentice - [Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization III]

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

Evaluation: A well-rounded Apprentice at the start of his real career.

Even the System complimented him for working on his weakest skills. He shouldn't let his designs be dragged down by a critical shortcoming.

"My DP barely grew. It's still a long way until I reach 2000 DP."

His current plan called for earning enough DP to advance his Mathematics skill to Journeyman-level. Without this upgrade, Ves wasn't willing to release a second iteration of the Marc Antony. As his primary money maker, Ves wanted to make the updated variant last.

Ves had a lot on his plate when he finally returned. He was already looking forward to it all.

Chapter 117: Back In Business

"The prodigal son returns!" Marcella Bollinger greeted Ves with open arms as he arrived at her office.

"Does that make you my mom?"

"You wish!"

"Jokes aside, thank you for granted the Barracuda a berth in your private docking space."

"If there's one thing brokers don't lack, it's space. I'll be sure to keep your new toy secure."

The two sat down and began to discuss how the Bright Republic fared in his absence. The mech broker employed an entire department of analysts who kept track of the political and economic trends of their state. Marcella freely shared some of her insights.

"Everyone is smelling a war is brewing, but this time is different." She said grimly. She obviously predicted dark tidings. "We expect the Vesians to stir the pot a little, but the uprisings and terrorist attacks are much more severe than the Republic has anticipated. Every state in the star sector is suffering from some source of instability."

Ves scratched his head. Even the Vesians were dealing with their fair share of terrorists? "Could it be another star sector is having designs on our territory?"

"No, that doesn't make sense. The Komodo Star Sector ranks near the bottom in both exotic resource deposits and economic development. There's something bigger brewing behind the scenes. We won't know what's going on until they spring their plan on us."

"That doesn't sound reassuring. You're right, this isn't something we should stick our hands into. Better let the politicians from Rittersberg earn their pay for once."

"Your old friend Vincent is gaining prominence." Marcella added with a smirk. "He's one of the spokesmen for the so-called Bentheim Independence Movement. They want to secede Bentheim and its surrounding influence from the Republic, with violence if necessary."

"That's crazy! If Bentheim is our only port system. Without it, the Bright Republic is finished. Bentheim won't be better off either. Without the

population and support from the rest of the Republic, the newly independent movement will only amount to a fourth-rate state at most."

"Don't underestimate their appeal. Bentheimers always consider themselves superior to the rest of the Republic. They resent the fact that they have to take their marching orders from Rittersberg. It doesn't help that much of Bentheim's wealth is used to subsidize the development of other planets and star systems."

The issue turned out to be quite the wedge between the people of Bentheim and the rest of the Republic. While Cloudy Curtain fell under Bentheim's sphere of influence, Ves had little sympathy for these delusions.

"So how's the mech industry faring these days?"

Marcella gave Ves an ambivalent smile. "The attacks are straining our industry's supply chains. Shipments get hijacked, factories get blown up or certain businesses get persuaded to cancel their long-standing contracts. It might only happen here and there, but each disruption has a ripple effect that affects all other companies down the supply chains."

"In other words, the saboteurs are trying to achieve maximum disruption with minimum effort. They shouldn't be part of a powerful group, then. Maybe they don't have a scary backing."

"Surprisingly, the chaos has only led to greater sales. The Mech Corps has expanded their orders by fifteen percent. Many mercenary leaders decided that they'd rather expand their arsenal immediately than to wait for the transition to the next generation of mechs."

"Looks like it's already high season for the industry. It's too bad I'm missing out."

"Are you sure you won't reconsider fabricating your current model? I already said I had a big order in store for you. It's easy money."

"The Marc Antony doesn't conform to my standards anymore. I can't allow any detractors to make an example out of it to convince the public that I'm not worthy to be an apprentice."

Marcella shrugged. "It's your call. Let me warn you that it won't do your credibility any good if you are halting your sales for an extended time."

A mech designer that was all talk and no show didn't go far in the business. Ves knew he risked squandering the goodwill he gained from becoming Master Olson's apprentice.

Ves asked for some tips on applying for a loan. Marcella briefly explained the procedure and what he should watch out for. She had a very daring suggestion when it came to collateral.

"You should put up your corvette as collateral if you're in need of a large amount of money. A genuine luxury corvette from the Friday Coalition is worth as much as a medium-sized company here. It's the best way to make use of a shiny but non-essential asset."

"No." Ves shook his head. "Absolutely not. I don't want to risk the ownership of the Barracuda. Besides, I'd be drowning in credits if I put up my ship for collateral. I can't grow my company that quickly without losing grip."

Marcella dropped the subject once Ves refused to budge on this matter. "Take a look at last month's national sales figures. Most of the skirmishes that have taken place are mainly hit-and-run attacks. Sales of light mechs have gone through the roof."

After discussing some minor issues, Ves ended his talk with his broker and left her office. He returned to the spaceport and met up with a waiting Dietrich and Lucky.

"Finally you're back!" The bored pilot spoke as he rose from his chair. "Are we done with this place?"

"I've finished all of my arrangements, yes. Your mech and my cargo are already being shipped back home. We've got a transport to catch."

They boarded the transport and took their seats without issue. The modest, utilitarian decor of the local spaceship contrasted sharply with the classier ships from the Coalition. This was the first time in months that he felt as if he finally felt at home. He didn't have to worry about class differences or watch his step in case of bumping into a powerful bigwig.

After two days of placid travel, their transport landed at Cloudy Curtain's spaceport. Their journey together finally came at an end.

Ves held Lucky close to his chest while making sure his floating luggage followed him out of the ship. He turned around and said goodbye to Dietrich. "It's been a wild ride. We've cut it close, but we made it through."

"I'd rather take a break from all the action." Dietrich smiled helplessly as he said, "No offense, but you're a dangerous man to be around."

After a friendly pat on the shoulder, the exuberant mech pilot returned to the embrace of Walter's Whalers. The entire spaceport was a hive of activity as the gang finished their preparations for their upcoming scavenging expedition.

Ves had no further involvement in their proceedings. In exchange for forsaking all of his claims on the abandoned base, he'd receive the full sale value of the blackmail material they recovered from a stash.

"Let's go home, Lucky."

When the aircar arrived in front of his workshop, Ves sighed in relief. Nothing happened to his workshop. A lone security bot vigilantly patrolled the perimeter and the electric fencing sparkled ominously. Household bots neatly trimmed the grass and swept up any dust in their way.

A familiar face waited by the entrance. Carlos Shaw resolutely quit his job arranged by his father's connections. His friend severed his only opportunity to climb the ladder of a major mech manufacturer.

"Hey Ves. Look at you. Last time we met, you were just a fellow buddy. Now you've become an unreachable existence. You even look handsomer!"

Ves did change a lot since he left the Bright Republic. His mentality matured after winning the Leemar Open Competition and surviving two different pirate attacks. His appearance grew smoother due to the changes brought by the gene boost.

Finally, he set aside most of his normal clothes and started donning his gifted antigrav clothes all the time. The malleable high-tech clothes came preprogrammed with an entire library of stylish outfits. Even a fashion illiterate boor like Ves could not go wrong once he took advantage of this function.

"Let's step inside before we discuss your employment." Ves calmly spoke and led his friend past the security measures and into his shabby workshop.

Lucky escaped from his grasp and ran to his private little bed. The cat had grown less active over the past few days. Ves suspected his pet was about to undergo a fundamental transformation.

Once Ves finished arranging his luggage, he returned to the living room and stared at his friend. Carlos sat at the dining table with a data pad in front. The pad showed his employment contract.

"My broker arranged this cookie cutter employment contract. I've modified a couple of terms in order to suit my purposes better. You will work for my company in a full-time capacity as a mech fabricator. I'm not hiring you to be my designer, but you are free to use my licenses and facilities to play around if you finished your daily tasks. You will receive a modest pay of ten-thousand credits a month before taxes. Do you have any questions?"

Carlos scrunched his face. "Yeah, it says here you will own all the rights for any commercial designs I register at the MTA. Isn't that a little overboard?"

"I don't think this is an unreasonable demand." Ves retorted with a firm voice. "Mech designers usually don't allow their subordinates to borrow their facilities in the first place. If you are taking advantage of my hard-earned equipment and licenses, then your designs should also belong to me. Don't worry, the contract states that you'll receive appropriate credit as well as a cut from any sales."

It might not be entirely fair to Carlos, but Ves wanted to make it clear who was in charge. He knew that Carlos wanted to work under Ves in order to develop his own mech designer career. Ves didn't want to invest in Carlos without getting anything in return. If Carlos thought he was going to be a selfless chump, then he was sorely mistaken.

"Okay, I can accept that." Carlos said and dropped his objection. "The next page states that I have to sign an MTA-administered disclosure agreement. You know the penalties for breaking a contract under the purview of the MTA, right? In the worst case, I can even get executed!"

"I trust you, but I've made quite a few enemies." Ves crossed his arms. "Who knows if someone offers you a couple of billion credits to pass on some information?"

"I would never do that!"

"Even if you are inhuman enough to resist becoming an instant billionaire, perhaps you'll receive threats. No one is infallible, Carlos. I don't want to consider the option of you betraying me. I can be assured you won't do anything stupid if I bring in the MTA. It will also send a signal to my enemies that there's no use trying to use their means on you."

Since it was a matter of life and death, Ves gave Carlos time to weigh the issue. If his friend insisted on change, then he would withdraw the employment contract. He had a lot of secrets in his closet. While Ves didn't intend to inform his employee about the System or the X-Factor, it never hurt to prepare beforehand.

"Okay. I don't know what you're hiding, but if you think it's serious enough to bring in the MTA, then so be it. I'll sign your darned NDA."

After going past these hurdles, Carlos brought up a range of minor issues. Ves patiently explained his thoughts even showed a little flexibility by changing some minor clauses. He hardly cared about when Carlos would claim his vacation days, or how much of a bonus he earned if he worked overtime.

"If that's all, then let's visit the local branch of the MTA to finalize the contract and sign the NDA. You'll start your work tomorrow. I'll arrange a spare design terminal and some other amenities in order to accommodate your presence."

After a firm handshake, Carlos left the workshop and went back to his new home. In preparation for his new job, he already rented a nearby home in the nearby suburbs of Freslin.

Ves returned to his workshop. He had to arrange the storage of his salvaged Dortmund parts. He considered taking another loan in order to fund the purchase of an alloy compressor. He also wanted to earn some very precious DP by designing a couple of virtual mechs.

In short, he was back in business.

Chapter 118: First Employee

The next day, Ves stared at a glowing blue ball. He remembered that Lucky settled into his bed here. Overnight, he somehow turned into a dangerous-

looking ball of energy. After stretching out his hand, he noted that the ball did not emit any kind of heat.

"Lucky should have warned me if he was up to something dangerous. I'd better leave this ball alone for now."

He remembered that he promised Lucky a million credits worth of minerals. Despite his apprehension at spending so much money, Ves still wanted to keep his promise. He went to his terminal and opened the MTA's internal market. After ordering a bunch of shiny-looking ores, he confirmed his order. He expected Lucky's present to arrive within the week.

He walked to his backyard and stared at the large containers that arrived in the morning. Ves summoned up his workshop's cargo bots and brought its contents to a secure storage room. He handled the boxes of Dortmund parts carefully.

As Ves did not plan to reconstruct the Dortmund immediately, he left the boxes unopened. Before he started work on reconstructing the industrial-scale 3D printer, he wanted to accumulate more skills. It would be foolish to ruin the reconstructed printer due to underestimating the difficulty involved in putting it back together.

"It's all about the skills." He said ruefully. "I'm never ready to do anything if I constantly chase after upgrades."

He couldn't help it. Reconstructing the Dortmund and updating the Marc Antony variant both required him to exert his utmost. Both were critical projects that Ves could not afford to screw up.

The extra office equipment he ordered yesterday arrived as well. Ves received the extra terminal, chair, drinks dispenser and other amenities and set them up in his workspace.

He reconfigured the workroom into an office space that complied with the local codes. He installed several privacy screens into basic cubicles that ensured a worker's privacy without isolating them completely.

Ves also activated the setting that prevented sounds from spreading. He had a tendency to talk to himself, and didn't want to bother Carlos with his ramblings.

Some of the work might not be entirely necessary at the moment. Ves wanted to prepare for the future.

"Speaking of expansion, I don't think I've thought up a proper name for my business yet. It's still registered as a sole proprietorship. That's fine when I'm just starting out, but now that I'm thinking of increasing my scale, I really should get around to registering a corporation."

A sole proprietorship basically meant that Ves and his business were one and the same. Any losses the business made reflected directly on him. This might be fine for small-time street corner stores, but for a company that dealt with goods worth millions of credits, it was wholly inadequate.

A limited liability corporation was a separate legal entity in the eyes of the Bright Republic and most other states. If his business somehow screwed up and incurred a loss of a billion credits, then Ves wouldn't be liable if the company declared bankruptcy. Naturally, things weren't so simple, and Ves still had to deal with some of the consequences.

Registering a corporation was not a simple task at all. He had to set up a charter and enumerate everyone's rights.

"Ah, I'll take care of it later." Ves waved his hand, adding it to his increasingly growing to-do list. "First, I'll have to bring in Carlos to the fold."

His friend arrived at his doorstep at noon. Ves met him outside and hailed a high-speed aircar for them both. After boarding the vehicle, they were on their way to Orinoco, the planetary capital on the other side of the planet.

On the way, Ves explained his expectations for his new fabricator. "Once you're officially employed by me, you'll have to brush up your assembly. It's of prime importance that you can assemble one of my designs without my supervision. If I have to look over your shoulder every time you bump into trouble, then what's the point of hiring you in the first place?"

"I understand." Carlos dutifully nodded. "In the time I've been waiting for you to return, I dove into my old textbooks. I've got a solid grasp on theory."

"That's insufficient for my purposes. My first and only commercial design so far is a very complex advanced mech. Its maze-like internal layout alone is prone to faults. Just one mistake could set me back millions of credits. No, you need lots of practice before you can even think of using my machines for real. I'll register and pay for an Iron Spirit mech developer account in your name."

"What? You want me to play a game?"

"Hey, don't knock on the game. The realism is sufficiently close enough that you'll be able to master almost all of the fundamental steps to fabrication in a safe, virtual environment."

"Doesn't it cost a lot of money to start fabricating a virtual mech?"

"Don't worry, I'll cover the costs. With my current savings, I can afford to splurge a little. Consider it an investment. Just don't expect a raise anytime soon."

According to the current rates, it cost about 18,000 credits to fund the fabrication of a virtual Marc Antony. As a notoriously overstuffed advanced 5-

star mech, Ves considered that Carlos needed at least a month of practice before he mastered the basics.

That was with the old version of the design. When Ves introduced the second generation of the variant, Carlos most likely had to do things over again.

Carlos smiled in appreciation. "I don't have time to be greedy when you've given me these opportunities. Thank you for taking care of me. I really appreciate all you've done."

"Then repay me by helping me grow my business. I need a trustworthy man by my side."

They spent the rest of the ride discussing the ins-and-outs of fabricating the Marc Antony. Ves did not have any notes about his insights, so all he could do was to pass them using his own words.

After a couple of hours, the aircar arrived at the MTA's local branch. Ves already scheduled an appointment, so they were led into an elegant meeting room by a low-level representative. Both Ves and Carlos confirmed their identities through numerous tests before signing a bevy of digital documents.

After leaving the MTA, Ves decided to stick around the capital. As they walked through Orinoco's modest shopping streets, Carlos whistled in appreciation.

"I can actually walk around without bumping into people all the time. I've got to say that it's a nice change of scenery. The only downside is that I still haven't gotten used to the constant cloud cover. It's even more disconcerting when the clouds adopt a rainbow sheen."

"Blame the original settlers for leaving the terraforming to the lowest bidder." Ves amiably said. "When you get used to it, you'll realize our sky is an endless canvas. Folks like to gaze endlessly at the clouds, taking inspiration from its infinite varieties."

It sounded incredibly boring to Carlos, but he kept his opinion to himself. Instead, he pointed at a nearby sculpture. "What's that?"

Ves did not answer his question immediately. Instead, he led his new employee to the foot of a thin but tall statue. It had been shaped into an archaic candle that reached above the tallest office buildings in the city.

A narrow trail of smouldering black smoke ascended from the top of the candle. Somehow, the smoke did not disperse, but maintain cohesion as it climbed its way into the clouds.

Both men looked up at top of the candle where its tip ceaselessly smouldered. Compared to the many monuments they onced toured in Rittersberg, the lone stone candle hardly matched up.

"Do you remember the founding story of the Bright Republic?" Ves suddenly asked.

"Sure I do. A bunch of marginalized idealists and pacifists from the New Rubarth Empire banded together and funded a colonization expedition to the galactic rim. They chafed at the stifling, militaristic culture of the Empire and wanted to create a paradise in the most remote corner of the galaxy. In their eyes, they wished to preserve the light of civilization in an unforgiving galaxy."

Every Republican citizen knew the story, and what followed after. The ancestors of the Bright Republic eventually reached the Komodo Star Sector, only to find the juiciest star systems claimed by expeditions funded by their more warlike rivals.

The few times the Bright Republic tried to wrest control of them ended badly, as pacifists did not make for very good soldiers.

Carlos continued the story. "After losing so many ships, supplies and men, they eventually came across a habitable world. They settled down on the planet and called it Rittersberg, the last refuge of a noble venture. The Bright

Republic was founded there and then, and over time the colonists expanded and claimed the surrounding stars."

"And what happened to their dreams?" Ves asked in a tone that indicated he already knew the answer.

"Over time, the Bright Republic shed its pacifists roots. They had to in order to fend off aggression from aliens and regional rivals like the Vesia Kingdom. Still, in order to commemorate their origins, they built the Eternal Lighthouse at the spot where the first colonist stepped foot on Rittersberg."

Ves gestured his arm at the giant smouldering candle. "The descendents of hardcore pacifists consider the Eternal Lighthouse to be a farce. When the Bright Republic slowly increased its militarization, the most dissatisfied pacifists scrounged up their meager savings and founded the planet that would eventually become Cloudy Curtain."

"So they built this candle as a middle finger to the Eternal Lighthouse?"

"Yup. The Smouldering Candle is supposed to remind the people of this planet that the rest of the Republic has forgotten their ideals. The light is snuffed, and only a smouldering tip remains."

"Huh. Don't you feel strange about basing your mech workshop on this planet of pacifists?"

"It's already been hundreds of years since the founding of this planet." Ves replied without a note of concern. "Time has wiped away our roots. These days, the locals drink their beer and watch the mech arena duels like any regular Republican citizen. The bureaucrats hardly raised an eyebrow when my father and I registered my business."

Nothing was eternal. Dreams only lasted until the people woke up. Life eventually must go on.

After touring the streets and showing off the local sights, the pair decided to return. They took another aircar back to the outskirts of Freslin and returned at the workshop by evening.

Carlos said his goodbyes. "It's been great hanging out with you. It brings me back to our days at Rittersberg."

"Be thankful for the break, because your work starts tomorrow. You need to master your new role as a fabricator as soon as possible. I won't allow you to be a drain on my resources forever."

"I understand. You won't regret hiring me."

After a good night's sleep, Ves woke up the next day and started working on some administrative details. He keyed Carlos into the security system and granted him limited access to the facilities. He also prepared a new mech designer account for him and granted it access to the designs under his Chasing Clouds account.

When Carlos arrived at the workshop, Ves led him to the office room and pointed at the second terminal. "That's your new workstation. I've already configured it to allow you to login to Iron Spirit and practice your skills."

"Can I make use of your design software as well? It will help me out a lot if I can flex my other mech design skills."

"It's already done." Ves replied and drew his employee's attention to a greyed-out icon in the starting menu. "I've set the terminal up to unlock the design software after working hours is over. You can stay over after you finish your shift if you want to play around with designing your own mech."

"That's very generous of you. Thank you again."

"No problem."

Once Carlos finished registering a developer account, Ves went back to his terminal and logged into his own game account. He put off work for several days now.

"I'm still missing about 700 DP. If I want to upgrade my Mathematics to Journeyman, then I'll have to publish a new virtual design."

The problem was that he couldn't afford to waste too much time. He had to get back to selling actual mechs in order to keep up with his timetable.

"Rather than designing a whole bunch of virtual mechs, I should focus on perfecting a single machine."

With the attention he gained from the entire star sector, Ves knew he was being watched. Many industry insiders kept tabs on him. He didn't want to squander all of this initial interest by releasing a sloppy design. The first impression was the most important one to make.

His last two virtual designs consisted of Octagon variants. His Mist Prowler acted as a capable ambush predator, while his Speed Demon excelled in chasing down light mechs. Both were competent designs for a Novice Mech Designer, but they fell short to his current standards.

After advancing to an Apprentice Mech Designer, Ves felt it was time to move on to 3-star designs. He already had a taste of these designs when he competed at Leemar. He only held back due to the cost.

"My spending account has nothing left. I spent way too much money." Ves took note as he checked his bank accounts. "I've already started dipping into my piggy bank. With only 22 million credits left in liquid funds, can I afford to splurge on virtual licenses?"

Ves decided to take a look at the catalog. Most of the licenses for the mechs averaged around a million credits. This was a steep price that put most amateur mech designers out of play. The lack of clutter appealed to Ves,

though he also had to compete against professionals with too much time on their hands.

"Even if I'm young, I can still stand firm." He concluded after taking a look at the best-selling variants.

It helped that he did not intend to top the sales charts. Ves was content if he earned 700 DP. With this modest goal in mind, Ves considered the type of mech he wanted to design.

"The ongoing tension has caused people to feel less safe. The game is experiencing an upsurge of players. In tumultuous times, they can only rely on themselves."

Many potentates intensified their training. They left behind the simple, generalist mechs and focused instead on mastering specialized mechs. Marcella already explained this ongoing trend during his last visit to her office.

Ves already had a plan in mind. In order to prepare for his upcoming redesign project, he wanted to work on a medium knight.

The Marc Antony was actually an overburdened hybrid knight. By working on this variant so early in his design career, Ves was actually putting the cart before the horse. He could gain more insight on hybrid knights by starting with the basic form of a regular knight.

In mech terms, knights referred to mechs armed with a single-handed weapon and a shield. Usually knights were armed with swords due to their versatility and popularity, though some relied on spears or axes.

A normal knight never wielded ranged weapons. Sometimes they carried a pistol, but never anything larger. Mechs focused on melee combat optimized their limbs for power. Ranged weapons did not make use of this. Instead, they demanded precision. A knight which tried to juggle both power and precision were called hybrid knights for that reason.

Regardless of their loadout, knights formed a bulwark of defense. They generally fared poorly when operating alone, but excelled in teamfights. With a knight holding down a position, any enemy had to go through a painful ordeal in order to dislodge the defender.

They also took on other roles if needed. For example, they made use of their tough exteriors to break through enemy lines. They also escorted vulnerable artillery mechs or any other kind of sharpshooter mechs. The synergy between a knight and a ranged mech was well-known.

"I'll have to design a knight that is able to work in a team."

Previously at Leemar, Ves designed mechs that operated alone. This was different. While he could still design a knight which excelled in solo duels, it had to seamlessly integrate into a team.

He settled a couple of parameters for his upcoming design. "The knight must be able to take a beating, so it will weigh at the top end of the medium weight class. It's going to be slow, but it should still be within the limits of a medium mech. The knight should also be a sufficient threat at close range, which means it is going to need strong arms and legs."

Most knights already took these factors in account. Certain designs fulfilled the basic requirements, but also emphasized some other aspects in order to distinguish themselves. What Ves sought in particular was a design with a powerful short-ranged dash.

After an hour of browsing through the catalog, Ves finally narrowed down his choice.

Chapter 119: Hoplite

Many mech manufacturers boldly entered the market with a superstar designs. Only a few companies demonstrated enough staying power to persist until today. The Lindholm Armament Company outgrew its modest roots to

become a giant trans-galactic corporation. Lindholm was a household brand name in the mech market, to the point where loyal customers brainlessly bought their latest products.

Ves normally disdained mainstream mechs, but their introductory model deserved a look.

The story of Lindholm started with their first commercially available design, the Hoplite HPL-100P. Two-hundred years ago, the introduction of the Hoplite propelled a small and obscure company to galactic prominence. Its design deviated significantly from convention.

First, the Hoplite used a spear instead of a sword as its main armament. Lindholm was not content with a simple spear.

Instead, they introduced an innovative weapon capable of adjusting its own length. Through a sturdy layered tube design, the Hoplite could extend or shorten the length of the spear at will. The only downside to this structure was that the spear could not withstand as much force.

"It's still a daring innovation." Ves said admiringly.

True, the weapon had flaws, but it worked out for the model. It proved a design didn't have to be flawless in an engineering perspective in order to sell well. "

The Hoplite also made use of an unconventional heavy shield. Its large round shield sported a flat, broad spike in the center, allowing it to pierce through armor when used as a weapon. Lindholm expressly designed the shield for offensive use by adding a couple of unconventional augments.

First, they attached miniature boosters to rear of the shield. They automatically ignited their charges when the Hoplite initiated a bashing motion. The boosters only burned for a quarter of a second, but that was sufficient to magnify the impact by up to fifty percent.

If that wasn't enough, the Lindholm designers also stuffed in an inertial manipulator. Normally, it remained inactive. The module only took effect when the Hoplite started to bash. It only reduced the shield's weight by thirty percent, which sped up the bash.

At the last instant before impact, the module reversed its settings, making the shield thirty percent heavier. This slowed down the bash but that hardly mattered when the shield impacted its target an instant later. The extra weight gave the bash more momentum, making the shield harder to fend off.

Hoplite pilots usually followed up by striking their target with an extended spear. This was the Hoplite's staple combo, one that propelled the design to prominence.

There were downsides to the augments. While Lindholm reinforced the boosters and inertial manipulator against shocks, they were still prone to malfunction. The augments also only carried a limited amount of charges, enough for three times.

The critics called it a gimmick. The mech pilots who performed the move professed their love for it. Despite the controversy, Lindholm aggressively marketed the ridiculous move and sold hundreds of thousands of Hoplites. The hype eventually faded out, but by that time Lindholm earned enough of a killing to fund the development of better designs.

If that was it, then the model should be forgotten by now. Instead, the Hoplite enjoyed enduring popularity in Iron Spirit due to its final feature.

Lindholm wanted to design a knight with offensive prowess. Upgrading the weapons wasn't enough. They also wanted to give their mech the ability to rush forward at high speeds. To do that, they extensively modified the Hoplite without relying on boosters.

Installing boosters was the conventional way of enhancing a mech's short-ranged boost. While powerful, they also imposed many limits on the design. Instead of dealing with issues such as fuel storage and heat management, Lindholm instead augmented the legs.

While the legs still appeared humanoid, the designers massively strengthened the artificial muscles. No one knew how they did it, but they introduced an original muscle scheme that allowed mechs to push off the ground in an extremely powerful burst. Extendable claws embedded in the feet helped maximize the Hoplite's grip, which prevented it from slipping.

Overall, Ves admired the original developers of the Hoplite. They were not afraid to implement their own vision onto the staid old knight archetype. The work done on the spear, shield and legs all complemented each other's strength, amplifying their effects when combined together. The designers succeeded in turning their outlandish vision into a practical product.

"The Hoplite is a masterpiece."

In design terms, the model was difficult to improve but easy to ruin. Many mech designers tried and failed to develop variants that significantly improved upon its performance.

Ves did not fear a challenge. He wanted to prove he could handle a difficult model like the Hoplite. The way to do that was to succeed in creating a new variant that was not some minor rehash of the base model.

[Lindholm Armament Company Hoplite HPL-100P]: 1.2 million bright credits

He winced at the price. While he still possessed a substantial amount of savings, he hadn't been earning any money lately.

"I still need to make another purchase."

Ves had a very simple plan in mind. He wanted to design that took advantage of the current trend. Many teenage potentates were currently flocking to Iron Spirit in order to polish their piloting skills.

Mastering a knight was one of the basic classes offered by mech academies and mech institutions. It was the simplest mech type and one that offered beginners an excellent starting point in piloting mechs.

One reason the base model only enjoyed a limited amount of popularity was that it was built around the spear. Trainee pilots only practiced with sword-wielding knights.

He intended to meet their needs by designing a sword-wielding Hoplite variant. While several such variants could already be found in the catalog, Ves thought he could put his own spin on the concept. After browsing the catalog, Ves found an appropriate weapon and added it to his shopping cart.

[J.J.V. Limited Imperial Sword ISX34]: 250.000 bright credits

The so-called Imperial Sword sounded fancy, but shared the same shape as the weapons used by trainees. The one-handed sword was not too long, not too short, not too heavy, not too light and so on. It had no distinguishing features due to the need to accommodate every possible mech pilot, at least at the start of their training.

Ves chose the Imperial Sword because it was a well-designed upgrade from the cheap and sub-standard training swords. J.J.V Limited poured a lot of research into improving the simplistic sword design, from changing its composition to adjusting its shape and center of mass. It led to a weapon that many recruits loved to use at the start of their careers.

"It's not a very exciting sword, but it is a time-tested design. It's sharp, tough and not too expensive. That's good enough for most mech pilots."

After confirming his purchase, his savings shrank. He now owned two 3-star licenses, enough to design a decent variant. Sat back in his chair and thought about what kind of vision he wanted to imprint onto his design.

As always, he tried to seek an example from ancient history. "A gladiator? No, I don't want to create a showboater. A viking? Too aggressive and undisciplined. A medieval knight? That might work, but I still feel it comes up short."

After a couple of minutes of fruitless digging, Ves gave up on referencing history. "Do I even need to draw on reality in the first place to form a coherent picture?"

He thought about his designs so far. Ves always let his mind drift to dramatic actions when he tried to form his intent. When he thought back on designs like the Marc Antony or the Mist Prowler, Ves automatically constrained his imagination to obey reality.

What if he broke this rule?

"The X-Factor is something that is alive but intangible. Something that isn't anchored in the physical plane has no obligation to be bound by its rules."

It sounded simple, but how could an engineer like Ves ignore the laws of the universe so easily? A mech was a machine. Their structure and composition was nothing magical. So long as mech designer obtained its blueprint, they could replicate the mech without problem.

All except for the metaphysical. The apparent existence of the X-Factor had long since convinced Ves that mechs might have a proto-spiritual presence. He never explored the full implications of this premise.

"A spiritual existence can take any shape."

Ves recalled the time when he achieved a minor breakthrough in the X-Factor. Back then, he was competing in front of the entire Star Sector for the first time. He had to design a mech as fast as possible in order to claim a high-ranking mech pilot in the free-for-all stage.

The mech that resulted from his heated efforts was the Unicorn. Despite the frame's many technical flaws, Ves imagined its design as a proud and inviolate mech that wielded its spear like the horn of its namesake. To be honest, he had no time to consider its fantastical background.

"A unicorn is a mythical creature. Everyone has their own ideas about what a unicorn looks like and what kind of powers it possesses. In this case, the only perspective that matters is the one held by the mech designer."

If the X-Factor needed to be grounded by reality, then a fantastical image should be detrimental. Somehow, Ves did not believe the Unicorn suffered any ill effects. It performed exceptionally well in Lovejoy's hands and slightly exceeded the limits of its shoddy construction.

"Is it really so simple?"

A single example did not prove his assumptions. Yet Ves instinctively believed he was on the right track. "The question is, am I willing to test it out?"

He strongly wished to test this new approach. The risks were great. If he screwed up his first new design after winning the Leemar Open Competition, then he might not be able to drum up enough sales.

Yet what if he failed anyway? Nobody knew how to observe and measure something as ethereal as the X-Factor. At most, those who entered the cockpit had to endure an unpleasant vibe.

Ves was in an exuberant mood. Like a child stepping out of the house for the first time, he wanted to explore this new world. He was only limited by his own imagination.

He did not even need to reference an existing myth. Why not make up something on his own? Something that meshed with the components he had to work, instead of trying to stuff a pre-existing image into a mold that didn't entirely fit.

"Let's go with something strong but not too complex."

His active imagination branched off numerous possibilities. Some were thinly veiled derivatives of existing myths, while others sounded too radical to be useful.

He chose to base his design around the image of an immortal known as the Instructor. He used to be a daring knight and swordsman in the past, having distinguished himself in battle against man and beast alike. He gained strength from every victory and refined his swordsmanship to greater heights.

In his quest to be the pinnacle, he even sought to learn different styles from other masters of the art.

The Instructor finally achieved enlightenment. The warrior grasped the secrets of immortality and joined the ranks of the exalted among men.

The years went by and the wars died down. Eventually, the Instructor shed the passion of his youth. He settled down as a guard for an esteemed emperor who granted him with a sword of office. He wielded his blade not to kill, but to protect.

As the Empire he served reigned supreme, the Instructor lacked the opportunity to prove his worth. With nothing else to do, he started instructing the younger generation in swordsmanship.

Slowly, he became known for his teaching. The Instructor not only excelled at explaining the essence of swordsmanship, he also gained many insights in the process. He slowly cast off all the flair and excessive moves in his repertoire, and distilled his swordsmanship into a purer form.

"Am I being a bit too vague?" Ves suddenly asked. He was very satisfied with the story he built up, but he did not wish to waste too much time fleshing out the setting. He might as well become a novelist if that was the case. "I didn't think too much when I designed the Unicorn, so it's probably okay."

The details probably didn't matter too much. What Ves actually needed was a myth to support the shaping of his intent. With a strong and distinct image, it became easier to hold on to the main points and maintain a cohesive intent for hours. A complicated backstory made it harder to keep the threads together.

The story was not without purpose. Ves hoped to accomplish multiple goals with this specific myth. First, the Instructor was old. He experienced much in his life and fought in many battlefields. He mellowed out in his later years but still retained his edge for battle.

Hopefully the trait translated to cool-headedness in the heat of battle.

Ves also wanted to pass on the Instructor's love and obsession for swordsmanship. He did not make the Instructor a master of a single style, but instead exposed him to many different forms. While flexible, the Instructor thoroughly mastered the fundamentals due to his extensive teaching experience.

What Ves wanted to accomplish with this was to make his customers more susceptible to breakthroughs. He did not expect to create a miracle. Just a gentle push was enough.

"This is all too vague. I don't even know if I'm deluding myself with all these assumptions" Ves chuckled a bit. "Fantasy or not, it doesn't hurt to try."

Chapter 120: Iterating

Ves approached his latest design process like a project. Gone were the days where he haphazardly designed a mech ad-hoc in week-long sessions. His

improved skills gave him much more possibilities and opened his eyes to many factors he previously missed.

When he previously competed at Leemar, Ves had no time to double-check his work. The brutal time limits imposed by the rules forced him to follow his previous methodology of trusting his intuition that he got it right.

His latest project called for a cycle of design followed by testing and back to design. With his increased base of knowledge, he was able to wield the System's many mathematical models without acting like a caveman.

With every design choice, he could verify the results through rigorous testing. He could find better solutions and avoid mistakes as long as he spent enough time crunching the numbers.

Certainly, it took time. Despite the System's prodigious processing power, Ves could only draw a portion of its awesome capabilities. More than that, Ves might frequently resort to tweaking the models in order to simulate many different conditions.

He did not intend to lose sight of his initial goal. Before he began to design, he created a simple schedule.

"Let's see. Three weeks should be plenty of time to come up with a decent design. Any more than that and it's not worth the effort. I'll spend one week on shaping the design, and two weeks on refining it through modeling and simulations."

Ves also split the project up into different phases that corresponded to the parts he modified. He preferred to start from interior and work his way out, so the first phases dealt with the internal frame and the various internal components. Each time he finished modifying the relevant components, he'd test them vigorously until he became satisfied or ran out of time.

He'd go through each phase in this manner until he combed over every part of his design. At the end, he reserved a decent chunk of time to testing out his new mech in a holistic manner.

"Let's start with the internal frame."

The skeleton of the base model disproportionately favored the waist and legs. The Hoplite put an enormous amount of stress on the legs when it initiated its powerful dash.

Ves decided not to mess around too much with the internal frame. Any minor change he made here cascaded into a ton of follow-up effects. The basic design of the frame already worked okay. He merely updated the two-hundred year old design to modern standards and rigorously tested his changes. The frame's upper portion resisted heavy impacts a little better.

He turned to the core components next. He did not swap out any of the core parts, but trimmed their design in order to fit its current use. A real mech needed to be robust and last for years. A virtual mech only had to last a couple of team battles at most. The Hoplite offered a lot of redundancies at the cost of putting on a lot of weight.

Due to their self-contained nature, the modifications he made to the power reactor, engine and other parts required little time to test. Lindholm obviously licensed these components from specialist equipment manufacturers, so Ves found very few instances where he could optimize the design even further.

"Those manufacturers and research institutes make their living off licensing their products. They must have spent years in optimizing their builds."

The lack of faults prevented Ves from making gains without losses with regards to these components. Thus, he mainly exchanged robustness for reduced mass in a proportional relationship. Ves considered the tradeoffs he made to be worth the cost.

After that, he moved on to the next phase. He devoted a lot of time on reworking the internal layout of the mech from the ground up. With his Journeyman-level Mechanics and Apprentice-level Electrical Engineering, Ves chose to focus on increasing the mech's range of motion.

Among all mech types, the knight had the most restrictive range of movements. It didn't need anymore due to its plentiful armor and sluggish motions. This also made knights an ideal mech for trainee pilots to start with, because they didn't have to master many maneuvers in order to become proficient in piloting this type.

"The original Hoplite meanly uses its spear to thrust forward with incredible momentum. Lindholm didn't design the Hoplite to fare well at a closer range. They even included an augmented shield in order to knock back any mechs who came into knife fighting range."

This presented a big problem to any mech designer who wanted to turn the Hoplite into a sword wielder. The mech lacked the responsiveness and range of motion to keep up with a serious clash.

Ves did not wish to compete directly with more experienced designers who tackled the same problem. He only wished to transform the Hoplite into a proficient sword wielder while retaining much of the internal integrity of a knight.

He did not directly reference the old layout. Instead, he built up his own internal layout first before comparing it to the original version, spending a lot of time in the process. Due to the need to maintain a focused intent, Ves required frequent breaks in order to finish this boring hurdle.

When he finally finished his own layout, he compared the new one with the old. The differences were immense. He reconciled the two by adopting the best parts of both, and put the new scheme through a barrage of tests.

With each iteration of tests and tweaks, the resulting design scheme reached a new equilibrium. Ves succeeded in shaving off bits and pieces while keeping enough redundancies in place. The extra space allowed him to improve the range of motion of its arms.

At this point, Ves reached the halfway mark of his project schedule. He spent a significant amount of time doing tests, but gained better results than before.

Along the way, Ves frequently paused his work when he couldn't maintain his concentration. Since he cared deeply about imprinting the Instructor to his new design, Ves did not dare continue working when his mind started to fray.

In order to distract himself, Ves devoted the majority of his free time to tutoring his new employee. Carlos also worked hard in trying to understand the assembly process, but achieved little success so far.

"This mech is a nightmare!" Carlos moaned during an evening after work. "It's like someone stuffed two different mechs in a single frame!"

Ves took a sip of a can of beer. "The Marc Antony isn't pretty once you look past the armor. I did my best to simplify the mess, but there's only so much I could do at the time. I have some more ideas now. I'll try them out once I finish my current project."

"You're planning to update your only real product, right? I've been thinking about it while I've practiced fabricating it. Don't you think the missile launchers are kind of redundant? Even the Caesar Augustus rarely finds an opportunity to make effective use of it. There's not enough capacity or firepower behind the missiles to achieve anything meaningful alone."

To be honest, Ves did not like the shoulder launchers either. They added unnecessary bulk for just two salvos worth of missiles. The mounts were troublesome to detach and even harder to put them back.

Yet Ves never considered removing them entirely. His ongoing work on the Hoplite variant gave him a better appreciation of the knight class. He gained a better understanding of what Jason Kozlowski wanted to achieve when he initially came up with the design.

"The missile launchers are an essential part of the Caesar Augustus series. There are many hybrid knights that combine laser cannons with swords and shields, but very few of them dare to add a third weapon to the mix. The launchers can hold a variety of missile types and add much-needed flexibility to an inflexible mech."

"Inflexible is an understatement. The Caesar Augustus is as stiff as a board."

"It never tries to excel in this aspect in the first place. The Caesar Augustus is still a capable knight up close. Any mech pilot that has received advanced knight training should be capable of working around its weaknesses."

An advanced mech required an advanced mech pilot to make full use out of its capabilities. The normal rank-and-file pilots did not normally touch sophisticated models like the Caesar Augustus. The Marc Antony was basically the bargain bin version, but it still retained much of the advanced characteristics that made it difficult to master.

"I doubt most advanced pilots even care about the missile launchers."

Carlos had a point, but Ves still insisted on the missile launchers. Removing them turned his variant into a regular hybrid knight that competed directly against a large number of mature designs.

The next day, Ves went back to work. He finished the insides of the mech. Now he had to work on the most important part of a knight.

The Hoplite is similar to the Caesar Augustus in that both designs are clad in as much armor as possible. If they carried anything more, then they'd lose too much speed to be of any use when dodging enemy fire.

His main goal in redesigning the armor scheme was to compliment his previous work. He had to accommodate the mech's increased range of motion without compromising its defense.

First, Ves stripped off the old armor scheme and designed the broad strokes of the new one. His knowledge in metallurgy allowed him to leverage the properties of the alloys used in the Hoplite's armor system in a modern fashion.

"Too bad the old armor has already benefited from armor compression. The only thing I can do is apply the existing formula to any existing plates."

With the help of Medium Armor Optimization II, he refined the sketch into a precise shape. Once he started modeling his work, he realized the true value of this sub-skill. It did not merely give him better ideas on how to shape a mech's armor.

No, the true worth of the Armor Optimization skills was to help him understand the more advanced simulations. More than that, he could also fine-tune the mathematical models to achieve a preferred outcome. Furthermore, he saved quite a bit of time by skipping redundant calculations and combining several models together.

Ves made full use of the extra time he bought by refining the armor incrementally. The improvements were marginal but welcome. More than that, he caught two minor flaws and eliminated them before they could act as potential weak points.

The end product deviated quite a bit from the base model's armor scheme. Ves basically broke up the largest, stiffest portions of the armor in favor of smaller segmented plates. This increased the armor's flexibility at the affected part without giving up too much defence.

To offset the vulnerabilities that came with the increased amount of moving parts, Ves thickened many critical sections. He kept this to a minimum by modeling the result of every potential reinforcement. He decisively rolled back the changes when it hardly brought any benefits.

Now that he finished redesigning the frame of the mech, Ves turned to his variant's equipment. He left the Imperial Sword alone, since he lacked the expertise to know what he was doing. He was already satisfied with its current specifications.

As for the shield, Ves saw an opportunity to increase the reliability of its active systems. The number one complaint the Hoplite received was that the augments often malfunctioned when put under pressure.

"It's a two-hundred year old experiment. Even if I'm not allowed to use more modern components, I can still see plenty of ways to strengthen the augments."

It wasn't as if Lindholm knew any better. Two-hundred years of progress in the Age of Mechs hadn't birthed a technological revolution. Only a couple of high-end inventions caused a stir. The lower-end technologies only received incremental improvements.

Iron Spirit did not allow Ves to introduce any innovations that broke the 3-star limit. Much like he did elsewhere, he only implemented optimizations that could still have been achieved two-hundred years ago.

Naturally, he didn't limit himself to replicating the obvious. He sought to refine the augments even further by building an improved shock absorbing shell around the fragile components. It took a lot finicking and testing before Ves tentatively accepted the latest iteration as the best he could do.

"Only a specialist or a much more experienced mech designer can do better."

Now that he finished going over the sword and shield, Ves put the entire package through a myriad of simulations. He measured its performance in a variety of environments such as deserts and snow plains. He simulated combat against a host of different mechs. He tested how the mech fared in a duel as well as in a large-scale battle.

Though the simulations had their limits, they all proved useful in catching weaknesses that only showed up under very specific circumstances.

For example, in an extremely hot environment, the mech channeled an excessive amount of heat through a specific spot near the mech's arm joints. This degraded the performance of the arms and increased its susceptibility to heat-based damage such as lasers. Ves modified the internal structure and the armor plating at those sections in order to plug the leaks.

After pushing through thousands of near-identical simulations, Ves finally had enough and called it a day. "I'm almost at the end of my three week deadline. It should be about time to wrap up this design."

Ves was very proud of his design so far. The variant exceeded the original Hoplite in many aspects. Its specs easily reached the standard of what an Apprentice Mech Designer should achieve.

If he approached the project in a casual manner, then the resulting design might only be eighty percent as good. Though he needed to spend a lot of time to achieve that extra twenty percent performance boost, it was well worth the time.

Now he only needed to put the finishing touches to his design.

"Wait a minute. I think I forgot something." Ves suddenly halted. He stood still for several minutes until he realized he forgot an old friend. "How could I forget about the Festive Cloud Generator?!"