

Chapter 121: Vibrant

Ves completely forgot about the Festive Cloud Generator. The QuickForge system he used in Leemar didn't include the decorative component in its catalog. Even if it did, he didn't want to waste any time trying to incorporate a component with next to zero combat application.

"Even if it's useless, it still looks cool."

Local mech culture out here in the rim frowned upon a lack of professionalism. Mechs were vital weapons of war and their exterior should reflect their bloody purpose. That was why Vincent Ricklin's codpiece-sporting mech had been so widely derided.

Somehow, his frequent use of the Festive Cloud Generator got a pass. In most mockups, his mechs were usually displayed with the generator turned off. This made his mechs appear more sober than they actually were.

Only when a pilot bought the mech did they realize their mech emitted colored smoke from various parts of their mechs. Since the smoke only made them look cooler, hardly anyone complained.

Before he incorporated the generator, Ves first had to define his mech. An imaginary character called the Instructor acted as his inspiration. He thought about bestowing his variant with the same name.

"No, that won't work." He shook his head. "It not only sounds boring, it will give my customers the mistaken impression that it is a mech meant to be piloted by teachers instead of students."

How could he come up with a name that reflected the Instructor's values while making his mech attractive to the young?

The Instructor fed the flames of passion in his youth, using it to accomplish many feats. Though age has tempered the fire, it continued to kindle, ready to

flare up when called to battle. The man was old in temperament but young in heart.

"Young Blood."

The name came out of nowhere, but it described the Instructor's drive. Even after achieving immortality, he never stopped advancing his swordsmanship.

Besides conforming nicely with his mental image, the name should also appeal to the target segment. As a business owner, Ves knew the importance of a good name. Great marketing began with an attractive product.

Many potential customers might only ever encounter his products when they stumble upon their names. Having a great name made it a little more likely that they clicked on it in order to learn more. From there, Ves could employ many other methods in order to increase his sales.

By mentioning blood, Ves was obliged to incorporate its color to his mech. He did it in an understated way by coating the Young Blood in a plain metallic color which was traditional to knights. He merely sneaked in a subtle reflective sheen in red.

In order to break up the monotonous appearance, Ves added golden decorative streaks around the torso. He was careful not to overdo it. The only part he spent more effort on was the variant's large, round shield. He painted a stylized lotus flower in yellow onto its surface.

Why a lotus? Ves imagined the Instructor loved to watch over the lotus flowers in the imperial palace's gardens. The flower stood for serenity, which might be a strange thing to include onto a shield meant to bash enemy mechs. Ves merely wanted to add something that looked good. The meaning wasn't important.

With this addition, Ves picked two different locations to include a Festive Cloud Generator. He attached a small-sized module to the shield. After

rearranging its rim, Ves programmed the shield to emit a large quantity of yellow smoke whenever the Young Blood enhanced its shield bash.

By limiting the emission to the moment of impact, Ves was able to drastically reduce the size of the additional module. He did not want to go through another round of testing and simulation in order to properly integrate the generator.

He also installed a pair of cloud generators in the legs. Just like the shield, the generators only activated when the mech was about to perform a burst dash. He dyed the smoke in red this time in order to give his mech an impressive streak from behind.

After finishing the aesthetics of his design, Ves finally put down all of his work. "It's time to face the piper. Go ahead, System. Hit me with your report."

[Design Evaluation: Young Blood.]

Variant name: HPL-100S Young Blood

Base model: Hoplite HPL-100P

Original Manufacturer: Lindholm Armament Company

Weight Classification: Medium-Heavy

Recommended Role: Knight

Armor: A

Carrying Capacity: C-

Aesthetics: B

Endurance: A-

Energy Efficiency: B-

Flexibility: C+

Firepower: D

Integrity: B

Mobility: D-

Spotting: E

X-Factor: C

Deviance: 70%

Performance improvement: 23%

Cost efficiency: +7%

Overall evaluation: The Young Blood is an affordable variant that retains much of its durability while benefiting from increased flexibility. A comprehensive rework of all of its systems has raised many of its parameters. A largely coherent thread of X-Factor suffuses the entire design. This is all the more impressive when the inspiration to the X-Factor consists of a single mech designer's idle fantasy.

[You have received 100 Design Points for completing an original design with a performance improvement of over 10%.]

[You have received 500 Design Points for designing a mech with a moderate presence of X-Factor.]

"Yes!" Ves rose from his chair. "I succeeded! My X-Factor has reached a score of C!"

Though it fell short of the C+ that Ves had reached with the Marc Antony and the Unicorn, those mechs came about in very special circumstances. It wasn't easy for Ves to feel all fired up. He was content with finding the way to reach the range of Cs when working on routine designs.

The relatively high score also validated his assumption that the X-Factor was not limited to physical constraints. At least, up to this point. Ves still consciously limited his imagination to myths that were larger than men, but less than gods.

"I don't want to find out what will happen if I take the old Christian God as my inspiration. I really don't want to open that particular can of worms."

Ves also achieved a twenty percent performance improvement without making use of expensive gadgets. He only brought in a ready-made sword to replace the spear. This was an incredible milestone, and one that Ves expected to surpass in the future.

The 600 DP reward came at a very nice time. The three weeks of slogging and maintaining his focus handsomely paid off. Ves only lamented that he was only a couple of DP short of reaching 2000 DP.

"Come on System, don't be such a tease. I deserve a treat!"

[Two-thirds of your design's improvements is attributed to updating an outdated mech with modern techniques. The performance increase that can be traced to your own original solutions is significantly smaller. Remember, you must study hard, but the only way to reach the pinnacle is to walk your own road.]

He bent over his head in defeat. The System was heartless as ever. "It's true that I copied and pasted from many other sources. I shouldn't be too proud with my design."

After regaining some of his mood, he logged into Iron Spirit. Ves imported the design to Iron Spirit and started fabricating a copy in the game's virtual workshop. Due to his extensive familiarity with his own design, Ves had no trouble with building up the virtual mech, even while maintaining his concentration.

He imagined bringing an incarnation of the Instructor to life. "How will he react to coming into life in a virtual game simulation? Will he be happy to experience new things? Will he be sad that he will give up control over his own body? Perhaps he might find joy in guiding the young and eager pilots who enter his cockpit."

Unlike his previous inspirations, the Instructor was his sole creation. He became invested in its myth to the point of treating it like a living person.

For a time, the line between reality and fantasy seemed blurred.

Only when Ves finally finished the fabrication process did he wake from his fugue. "That's a little weird. What was I thinking?"

He spent less time fabricating the mech than he thought. It only took a full day instead of the two days he originally budgeted. Despite the expedited process, the game did not detect any faults when Ves finalized its build.

He didn't forget to add a gold label inside the cockpit before he did so. He configured the design settings so that it would turn into silver when he let Iron Spirit sell a duplicated copy of the variant. Ves did not want the gold label to proliferate too much.

Ves entered the market interface and set the prices to both the gold label and silver label mechs. Different from last time, he did not use the minimum possible floor price but instead added a small profit margin to both products.

It didn't matter to the gold label because only one existed, but it represented a fairly different positioning to the silver label mechs.

Basically, Ves thought his Young Blood was good enough to deserve such a price. It also made more sense to charge this much. If he continued to hold on to bargain bin pricing, then his customers would subconsciously assume his mechs only performed as good as all the other trash mechs in this price segment.

He still wanted to earn as much DP as possible. That hadn't changed at all. Ves merely followed good business sense by managing the perception of his products.

Just as he was about to release his variant to the virtual market, he paused.

"This isn't a casual product. This is my first public design since coming back from Leemar. There should be some fanfare involved with the debut of this design."

Ves turned away from the market interface and instead pulled up his comm. He placed a call to his mech broker.

"Ves?" Marcella yawned as she looked up from her digital paperwork. "Have you finished the rework?"

"No, I haven't started yet on updating the Marc Antony. I'm calling you because I want your help in publicizing my latest virtual design."

Ves sent over the Young Blood's spec sheet along with some other data. He briefly explained why he spent time on a virtual design to begin with. Of course, he only limited his reasons to familiarizing himself with the knight archetype and to follow the current market trend for practice mechs.

Marcella did not need to know about his need to earn Design Points.

"I see. While it isn't conventional, I can see how we can spin it in a positive direction. However, you should be aware that marketing your variant comes at a significant cost."

"How much? Give me an estimate, please."

The woman tapped her finger against her firm lips. "For a knight variant with this level of performance, it's best if you hold a local advertising campaign. You don't have the specs to attract a lot of customers outside the Republic. The only thing you have going for is sympathy for local entrepreneurs."

"How much?" Ves repeated, feeling a bit uneasy with the way Marcella prefaced her explanation.

"The short answer? Around twenty million credits for a week-long exposure campaign in Bentheim. Anything less will only get drowned by the bulk of other messages floating constantly in the air."

One week just to push out the name of his variant? "No. Can't you offer anything cheaper?"

"Well, you can also make use of Iron Spirit's internal advertising channels. Again, if you want to penetrate past the noise, you will need to put up a significant upfront investment, say five million credits a day."

No wonder Ves achieved nothing the last time he used the game's internal advertising function. He might as well be throwing money into an ocean.

"Ahem, if you aren't aware, my earnings won't be very much even if I sell thousands of virtual mechs." Ves patiently explained. "To say nothing of earning useless ingame gold currency. I don't see any reason why I should spend millions of credits on some overblown ads that will only last a week at most."

Marcella shrugged, as if she didn't care. "Advertising works a lot better than you think, but I can understand your reluctance. Considering your current finances, it's better if you hold off on any mass marketing."

"Do you have a more affordable alternative? I only need to put the word out for my design. It doesn't need to be anything fancy."

The mech broker paused for a bit. Her eyes brightened as she found a good solution. "I got it! You're a newsworthy mech designer, you know that? Do you know what that means? The news sites want to interview you!"

Ves hadn't thought of that at all. She had a point. As one of the three extremely rare winners of the Leemar Open Competition, the Republic should be curious about his story.

"Alright, that's a good idea, and also costs nothing on my end. I don't know the best news organizations, so can you arrange a couple of interviews on my behalf?"

"I can do that easily, but it's best you only pick one venue to do your interview. These news sites are rather attached to exclusivity. It's the only way they can one-up the competition. In exchange, the news sites will push the interview to a more prominent place on their pages and broadcasts."

Since Ves had no clue how the news industry worked, he followed her recommendation. She had never steered him wrong so far. "Alright Marcella. Let's go with an exclusive if you think that's best. Right now, I mainly want to establish my brand."

"I'll go make some calls and come back to you within a day. Goodbye!"

Chapter 122: Interview

While Ves waited for Marcella to arrange an interview, he met up with Dietrich. The mech pilot finally sent him a subtle message that he succeeded in finding a buyer for the blackmail material they dug up at the abandoned base.

Dietrich embraced Ves in a hearty hug with almost crushing force. "Ves! Good to see you again. Let's go inside."

They entered a dingy little restaurant in downtown Freslin owned by the Whalers. Ves was leery of discussing sensitive matters in the middle of the city, but Dietrich insisted.

"The cloud burgers here are the best on the planet!" He said as he vigorously ordered a couple of burgers for them both. "And I'm not saying that because we own the property."

After a minute of settling down, Dietrich reported his results. "I've been putting the word out in the black market. It's been a little slow in spreading due to the need of staying discrete. I've finally found a single buyer who expressed interest in buying what we have on hand."

"That's good, right? What kind of price are they offering?"

The mech pilot pressed his lips. "The anonymous buyer is offering thirty-five million credits."

Considering the extremely expensive gear they found in the abandoned base, that was a remarkably low price. Whoever built that base must be swimming in money. Extorting a billion credits was not out of the realm of possibility.

"There aren't any other takers?"

Dietrich shook his head. "It's a matter of credibility. Anonymous sellers don't have much credibility in the black market. It's all about building a rep or getting to know someone who already has a rep. I'm just a fish in a pond of sharks."

"There's also the fact that only one of those sharks have taken the bait. He's basically setting the price."

"I don't know if the big boys are colluding to press down the price, but yeah that's basically what's going on. No one else has expressed any interest in our data even after weeks had passed. We either take the existing offer or leave it. The only upside to the trade is that the buyer wants to remain anonymous as much as us."

They weren't obliged to accept the low-ball offer. Yet Ves did not wish to hang on to dangerous material any longer than necessary. "Our safety is our highest priority. Getting rid of the dirty ledgers will deflect any potential attention away from us. The buyer might be offering peanuts, but he's also taking over all of the risks. Let's accept the offer."

Since Dietrich didn't benefit from the sale, he merely shrugged and promised to finish the transaction within the week.

As they ate their burgers, Ves asked how his gang had fared so far in their salvage operation.

"My father's staked a solid claim on the site. There's been a few opportunists who've tried to dislodge the Whalers, but they all backed off when they saw our numbers. The mercs didn't expect us to bring over half our entire manpower. We entrenched the hell out of the surrounding area."

If they Whalers managed to strip down the base and extract every piece of scrap, they stood poised to earn an enormous windfall. Ves predicted that the Whalers would quickly invest their money in mechs and fortifications.

The recent unrest has made every local power wary. They gathered their strength and waited for the other shoe to drop.

After finishing their burgers, which Ves admitted tasted pretty good, they went their separate ways. Recent troubles prompted Ves to visit the branch office of Sanyal Ablin Security Services.

Miss Robyn's exotic beauty greeted him with a professional smile. "Good afternoon, Mr. Larkinson. Are you here to talk about your security arrangement with us?"

"Yes. While I don't have the funds to pay for additional services on hand, I still wish to upgrade my current security setup."

"I am sure a man of your status has no problem paying the bill." Robyn replied and summoned up a projection that displayed a selection of security services.

"We have an internal assessment of the likely threats you and your assets may face. From this, we have generated a number of optimized security packages at different price points. Please take a look."

Ves currently contracted their Cyber-Robo Service for just 500.000 credits a month. This might be adequate to a low-value local business, but for an up-and-coming mech workshop it was wholly inadequate.

He planned to spend most of his upcoming windfall on comprehensively upgrading his security. He skipped the cheapest package worth five million credits and the most expensive one at fifty-million credits. He settled instead for the middle option valued at twenty-five million credits a year.

"Tell me more about the Strategic Reserve Service."

"Ah, this package is a great and cost effective security solution tailored to facilities of strategic importance in the event of a raid. While it is not meant to clash head-on against a committed invasion force, it is nonetheless capable of fending off opportunistic raids. We do this by placing enough deterrence around your premises to scare off any would-be robbers."

SASS mainly accomplished this by installing a number of fixed defenses, from anti-air turrets to anti-mech cannons. A permanent detachment of three security officers managed the entire security grid.

A bolstered force of security bots handled all of the regular patrols, both indoors and outdoors, A dedicated guard officer from SASS kept an eye on bots in case they glitched or got hacked.

His workshop's cybersecurity also received a comprehensive upgrade. SASS would take the initiative to dig a secure hardwire connection deep underground that connected his workshop to the security company's planetary mainframe.

As long as the connection stayed intact, his digital assets benefited from the personal attention to the best cybersecurity professionals in the Republic.

Overall, the security package checked almost every box. Ves only missed an actual mech standing guard. The company only started offering mech patrols at much higher price points.

With no other choice, Ves signed on to the plan and promised to transfer the twenty-five million credits within the month. In the meantime, Robyn arranged the upcoming upgrades and construction work to his workshop.

"You should start seeing some of our men by tomorrow. They'll be measuring the land and planning the placements of our turrets. The real work will start as soon as we ship in the required materials from Bentheim, which may take up to five days."

While Ves spent as much as the price of a commercial mech, he got a lot in return. He did not have to worry about any assassins or sabotage for at least a year. Hopefully no one found out he still harbored forbidden research in his comm.

He returned to his workshop and took a much-needed break. He checked his hibernating pet and thought Lucky should almost be done with his transformation. The glowing blue ball had grown dim. Ves looked forward to the day he reunited with his lazy cat.

Later that day, Marcella finally called back. She sure worked fast. "I threw your name into the lake and reeled in some nosy fish. I've got a selection of three different news organizations that have expressed interest in conducting an exclusive interview with you."

That sounded pretty good to Ves. "Tell me about them all."

"The first to respond is the Bentheim Mech Affairs. It's the third largest news portal in our local area, though its influence is minimal elsewhere. It's a strong local organization that I've got a good relationship with. If you're willing to,

'ahem', donate to a particular charity, I'm sure they will portray you in a good light."

"How much of a 'donation' are we talking about here?"

"If you want a softball interview, then a million credits is sufficient. If you want to set your own questions, then you'll have to pay up to ten million credits."

Ves shook his head. "I've visited their virtual portal once in a while. No wonder all of their articles read like infomercials. It won't do my credibility any good if I hold my interview with these types of organizations. Their influence is also somewhat disappointing."

"Don't look down upon BMA and their like. They serve their own purposes." Marcella patiently explained before introducing the next organization. "The Junior Mech Hero is the Bright Republic's most popular news and entertainment portal for kids and teenagers. They wield a lot influence and they're interested in hearing the story of your new mech."

"That sounds pretty good. They fit nicely with the Young Blood's target audience."

"There's a catch. The JMH is a large organization that publishes hundreds of articles a week. Your interview will only be posted in a sub-site and not on the main page. The manager I spoke to isn't convinced you're newsworthy enough to warrant better treatment."

That sounded disappointing, but Ves understood their thoughts. He was not exactly a renowned mech designer. "I'm fine with the JMH's conditions. I used to read their news digest when I was young. What's the last option?"

"This one came as a surprise. The Rimward Star Herald is one of the most influential neutral news portal among the third-rate states in the Komodo Star Sector. It doesn't have much reach in the Friday Coalition, of course, but

outside of that they have a very wide following, especially from the business community."

"The Herald is not a news organization that revolves around mechs." Ves pointed out. "People read the Herald if they want to find out which company they should invest in. It's not a news portal that allows me to reach my target audience."

Marcella spread her arms and shrugged. "The RSH is the most credible news outlet by far. A successful interview will certainly boost your prestige, which is helpful once you expand your business. They did warn me that they won't be gentle when they interview you. The RSH is one of the few organizations that prides itself on its journalism. Expect to face some pointed questions."

All of the organizations had their pros and cons.

The Bentheim Mech Affairs insured he had sufficient positive coverage.

The Junior Mech Hero allowed him to reach directly to his target audience.

The Rimward Star Herald boosted his reputation significantly if he survived the interrogation.

What did he need the most? Customers? Ves almost reached his targeted amount of DP. He could always use more, but he wasn't thirsting for DP at the moment.

Right now, Ves rather wished to be taken seriously by the mech industry. Raising his reputation didn't bring him any immediate benefits, but it could open doors that previously remained closed.

One aspect he always wanted to fix was to seek dedicated suppliers of raw materials. If he stopped being a noname wannabe, he might be able to meet with their executives.

"Let's go with the Rimward Star Herald. There's no use in trying to market my virtual mechs. It's enough if I can get a mention out of it. What I should really be doing is paving the way for the sales of my real mechs."

Marcella did not disagree with his choice. She gave him a small booklet of tips on how handle interviews and ended the call in order to arrange the interview with the Herald.

He didn't know if he made a mistake. Perhaps his ego grew too big. In any case, even if he failed the interview, he only risked his reputation. He could always regain what he lost by achieving a great feat. This should not be a problem with the benefit of the System.

Two days later, a reporter from the Rimward Star Herald arrived at Cloudy Curtain. Ves assumed the Herald wanted to conduct the interview over comm, but surprisingly they went for a personal touch. They even booked a suite in the best hotel in Freslin to record the session.

Ves arrived at the suite in his best clothes. He showed his appearance beforehand to Carlos, who merely shook his head and adjusted his look. Garbed in a rich formal suit of black and red, Ves cut a very mature look.

When he knocked at the door, it instantly slid open to reveal a chamber already prepared for the interview. Various bots finished placing the props and lights while a stately-looking woman sat on a furnished seat.

"Ah, Mr. Larkinson. My name is Jast Montefur. Just call me Jast. You are just in time. Please take a seat. I'd like to finish this interview as soon as possible so I can get away from this depressing planet."

She certainly sounded lovely. Ves apprehensively approached the set and took a seat placed at an angle facing Jast.

"First, let's touch up your appearance. Please don't move while the makeup bots do their work."

A handful of floating balls zipped in front of him and began to wash his face and apply the makeup to him. Ves wanted to ask if a man like him even needed makeup, but the bots kept crowding his face. They flew out of sight a couple of minutes later, leaving Ves to deal with his dizziness.

A score of high-quality recorders turned on, and Jast quickly fixed an authentic-looking smile on her face. "Good day our dear viewers, or if you are reading the transcripts, my readers. Today I'm visiting a quaint little planet called Cloudy Curtain, the home of its first and only mech designer. Ves Larkinson here is a scion of the Bright Republic's renowned Larkinson military family."

Jast did a good job describing his basic background, though Ves suspected she was reading a script from an ocular implant. She quickly wrapped up her obligatory introduction and served her first question to Ves.

"As a son of the Larkinson family, you surely wished to follow your family's tradition. How disappointed are you when you found out you do not possess the aptitude to pilot a mech?"

The question contained a number of traps. Ves paused and refrained from answering immediately. "Every kid likes to become a mech pilot. Few of them ever do, and that might not be so bad. Our society revolves around more than piloting. I have found a great calling in designing the mechs that pilots rely on to earn a living."

"You are the first and only Larkinson to study and choose a career in mech design. By all accounts, you have received no substantial support from the other Larkinsons. Have you already cut ties with your family?"

"That isn't true. We believe that a man or woman should stand by himself and make an honest living. The Larkinsons might be great pilots, but we do not have much in the way of wealth. The family is already doing enough to

support the relatives of our fallen. I do not wish to burden the family's finances even more."

The woman nodded and flipped her fingers, likely calling up some kind of info sheet or something. "Let's talk about the start of your career. You've graduated from Rittersberg with average grades after five years of uneventful study. What happened in the months between your graduation and your success at Leemar that has turned you into a prodigy?"

This was a major gap in his personal records. Ves expected this difficult question to come up and already prepared an answer in order to obscure the System's intervention. "I had help. Before he went missing, my father left me some resources and contacts that I could make use of to kickstart my career."

"Your father's disappearance is a rather perplexing case. Ryncol Larkinson is a seasoned pilot who has seen much action in the border wars against our neighboring aliens. Could he be involved with something murky?"

"I do not believe so." Ves laughed as he tried to cover up his own mounting panic. "My father is by all accounts a straight shooter. You can ask any of his friends who still serve at the base how he has little ambition except to serve the Republic and raise his son. I do not know why he left me at the time, but he has given me so much help throughout the years. I still miss him."

Jast raised an eyebrow and looked at him pointedly, as if she wanted him to know that she wasn't fooled. "Your 'straight shooter' of a father sure has interesting contacts. A local mech pilot from a remote corner of the galaxy is somehow able to refer you to a secretive grant institution operating out of the New Rubarth Empire. How could he possibly be involved with the 'Future Sons Technology Institution'?"

"Do you think I know?" Ves threw up his hands as if he didn't have a clue. "It's a surprise to me, but so far I have only been contacted by them once, when

they passed me a couple of aged production licenses. Frankly, they only did me a small favor, which they probably forgot the next day."

After a few follow-up questions, Ves did his best to deflect the suspicious woman's inquiry. Eventually, Jast stopped her digging and turned to another topic.

"Seeing as you've improved enormously since you received your father's gifts, participating in Leemar was a given. Did you travel to Leemar with the expectation that you'd triumph over all of the geniuses in your way?"

"We are all mech designers. I never took it as a given that I could prevail against any competitor. I merely came with the confidence that I could achieve a good showing. It was out of my expectation that I ended up at the very top."

They spent the next ten minutes discussing the competition, from the qualifiers that happened behind closed doors to the main event broadcasted to the entire sector. Jast repeatedly brought up the most notable opponents Ves had personally defeated, like Carter Gauge and Cynthia Barakovski.

Ves always spoke of them in a respectful manner, careful not to ruffle anyone's toes. Their influence extended far beyond their immediate circles.

After asking a couple of tame questions that Ves answered easily, Jast changed her tack and went for the throat.

"Now, the most interesting outcome of the competition is that two out of three of the finalists comes from the Republic. Many people happened to know that both you and Miss Patricia Schneider are in the same class in school. There must be something you are sharing with each other in order to keep up with each other. So tell me, are the two of you involved?"

For a moment, Ves considered if he was speaking to the wrong reporter. Did Jast work for one of the gossip rags those grannies always followed? How

could a reporter from the sober and business-centric Herald ask such a question?

Chapter 123: Publicity

Ves had to be careful in answering this question. If he said something sensational, his words might be splattered all over the galactic net. It might even get back to Patricia herself, who doubtlessly had little appreciation for controversy.

He employed the most important trick Marcella's notes had taught him. Evasion.

"I am only casually acquainted with Miss Schneider. She is a talented mech designer who excelled in her studies since day one at Rittersberg. We walk in different circles and it's a complete coincidence that we both reached the finals at Leemar."

"I see." Jast said, her tone colored with scepticism. "The two of you make a natural pair. Have you expressed any interest in pursuing your rival?"

"I'm devoting all of my effort to growing my nascent business. Running a workshop and designing mechs on my own eats up all of my available time. I hardly have a moment's of rest."

Fortunately for Ves, the questions that followed turned into a decidedly neutral direction. Jast began to ask the questions Ves expected a business reporter to ask. He answered questions concerning whether he was committed to doing business in the Bright Republic, whether he sold mechs to foreigners, if he planned to scale up production, and more.

"No, Master Olson has not involved herself in my business activities in any way except for gifting me with some goodies. All of the assets that I'm in possession of is in my own name. I have not given her any shares to my

business. She is an incredibly busy mech designer and has no time to hover over my shoulders."

Jast paused for a bit as she checked her internal notes again. Ves sat patiently, waiting for the questioning to resume.

So far, Ves did a decent job in portraying himself in a decent light. Certainly, he could have navigated through the suspicions more elegantly. He might suffer from repercussions to his clumsy answers.

In any case, Ves rather preferred that others thought he was a Rubarthan or Coalition plant. It beat people getting ideas that Ves possessed a piece of reality-defying technology. The Mech Designer System had to be kept secret at all costs.

"Let's talk about your product." Jast resumed her questioning. "Most of your mech designs are early works that already seem dated. Your sole production mech is an underperforming variant of a lastgen mech. Why have you decided to release a virtual mech instead of updating your physical mech line?"

"Come now, Jast. You know as well as I do that Iron Spirit is the biggest battlefield in the galaxy. Certainly, it's all virtual, but plenty of pilots have polished their skills in these kinds of immersive games. I do not share the disdain that most professionals have for taking part in this active ecosystem."

"Ah, your latest virtual release appears to be a variant based off the famous Hoplite. Please tell me what prompted you to design a plain sword-wielding knight."

Ves repeated the standard marketing spiel Marcella originally prepared for him. He emphasized that the Young Blood possessed characteristics that made it a great training mech for the younger crowd.

"Some might say that the Young Blood's special features act as cheats. The strengthened dash gives the knight more mobility than it ought to, while the

enhanced shield bash allows it to easily push away mechs that come too close. Won't trainee pilots begin to rely too much these crutches?"

"That can certainly happen, but I think you underestimate their resolve. The young still have to pass their courses with their boring academy-assigned models. The Young Blood is explicitly designed as an offensive knight, allowing it to keep up with its compatriots in fast-paced battles. The extra mobility and flexibility also allows the knight to take the initiative, which provides pilots with many more options."

"When we compared your variant to the best-selling sword-wielding knights, we found its specs are rather underwhelming. Why should players even consider buying your mech when numerous amounts of better models are available in the game?"

Ves coughed a little and tried to maintain his smile. "My mech has its own merits. A dry list of numbers can't fully express a mech's capabilities. You've already mentioned the augmented dash and shield bash. There's also the fact that I've spent a lot of effort improving the Young Blood's ergonomics. Piloting my mech should feel significantly more comfortable."

"Do ergonomics even matter when you're talking about a virtual mech?"

"Oh, it should be. I'm talking about more than a comfy seat. My mech features many internal adjustments that makes it smoother to move its limbs."

The X-Factor also played a large role, but Ves left that out.

"Your rebuttal hardly sounds convincing. All of the amenities you've mentioned are luxuries that does not substantially affect the core performance of your model. The Young Blood simply can't stand on an equal stage to the best-sellers."

"It has never been my intention to compete against the top models in the first place. If you look at the bottom of the spec sheet, you'll find that my mech charges a good chunk less than the mainstream designs."

Indeed, the Young Blood held its own when placed in the budget segment. Ves had purposely skimmed a small amount of mass from its design in order to lower its cost.

After asking a few more questions about the virtual mech, Jast turned to the future.

"Now that you have finished a virtual design, do you intend to continue exploring this market or do you have some other projects in mind?"

Ves anticipated this question. It was a good opportunity to pimp his soon-to-be-redesigned mech. "As you know, I only own two production licences. I have not yet plowed the depths of these two fascinating licenses.

Preparations for a rework of my Marc Antony design is already underway."

He kept the details mum, only hinting that the redesign was going to be a sea of change. Even the price will see a bump due to the expected increase in performance.

The journalist did her best to tease out the pros and cons of his first and only production mech. The cheap mass production armor remained a sore spot, but customers could easily afford two Marc Antony mechs instead of a single Caesar Augustus.

Jast closed the interview with a question whether he had any plans of moving to the Friday Coalition.

"While I am officially apprenticed to a mech designer from the Vermeer Group, I repeat that my relationship with her does not extend beyond matters of teaching. Any assistance Master Olson throws in my way will come with no strings attached."

"So you have no intention of moving to a larger state with a highly developed mech infrastructure? It is customary for talents like you who emerge from a third-rate state to move up to a better environment. Why not do the same?"

"The Friday Coalition is not my home. It's as simple as that. My father brought me up in the Bright Republic and taught me to respect and reciprocate the care and love I received from my state. I am still a Larkinson at heart, and we have always served the Republic with unswerving devotion."

"There you have it folks. Straight from the mouth of one of the youngest stars of the mech industry." Jast closed the interview and smoothly summarized the interview in a couple of sound bites. "His latest virtual mech is on sale starting tomorrow! Be sure to check out Iron Spirit's catalog if you are interested in piloting an affordable knight!"

Ves left the hotel and returned to his workshop wondering whether he did okay. Marcella hadn't lied when she stated that the RSH wanted to poke into his closet. He underestimated the amount of mystique he inadvertently accumulated with his sudden rise to prominence.

The next day, the Young Blood variant officially went on sale. Instead of sitting behind his terminal checking his real-time sales figures like an obsessive recluse, Ves very firmly stayed away. He only briefly entered the galactic net to check on the Rimward Star Herald's news portal.

The Herald worked quick. They already edited the interview and published both a recording and an article embellished with supplementary information. The news organization filed the interview under their financial section, though the military affairs section also hosts a copy.

In order to avoid fretting about his design, Ves distracted himself with work. He read through the dense repair manual of the Dortmund industrial printer. He taught Carlos how to overcome the most difficult hurdles in his way to

mastering the Marc Antony. He accompanied the consultants from SASS and agreed with most of their upcoming construction plans.

He went to bed with a fretful cloud hanging over his head and woke up the next day with hardly any rest. He scratched his messy dark hair and finally had enough. "Okay, alright! I'll go and check my numbers."

After washing up and putting on his antigrav clothes, he approached his terminal and logged into his Chasing Clouds account. He slowly summoned up his sales tracker.

[HPL-100S Young Blood - silver label] - Amount Sold: 2194

[HPL-100S Young Blood - gold label] - Amount Sold: 1

Ves blinked his eyes. He rubbed them gently then saw as the figure changed to 2195.

To a mainstream virtual mech model, a sales volume of two-thousand mechs in the first day represented a flop. To a solo mech designer in the early stages in his career, his current sales blew his previous efforts out of the water.

Ves did not yet call up his Status. If he knew how much DP he already earned, he might go crazy.

The game's sales tracker allowed Ves to glean more insights from his customers. According to the model's sales history, the initial buyers of his mechs all ranked fairly high in the game. Most of the players who bought the model shortly after it's release qualified for the Gold or Platinum League.

Half of the buyers came from the Friday Coalition. A smaller proportion originated from the Bright Republic. The remainder of the sales came from the rest of the Komodo Star Sector.

"These are probably professional mech pilots in the service of industry insiders who are keeping an eye on me. The interview also helped attract a lot of attention."

A very strange marketing effect occurred when five-hundred highly ranked players bought a model upon release. Iron Spirit's automatic market systems designated the recently released Young Blood as a hot property and a trending product in the Star Sector.

Players who were already predisposed to buying a new mech got saddled with the image of the Young Blood. While not everyone wished to purchase a knight, those that did eventually gave his mech some serious consideration.

Reviews and comments already poured in from the casual players who picked up the variant. Ves couldn't help but smile when he read how many players appreciated the 'feel' of his mech. Even if the game's automated production system degraded a copy's X-Factor, much of it still stuck to the duplicated mech.

Some renowned influencers even bought the mech to showcase it on their online streams. This led to a growing interest in his design, to the point that mech portals started to review the quaint little Hoplite variant that appeared out of nowhere.

Ves called Marcella in order to hear her perspective. The mech broker praised him for a successful debut, but warned him not to expect too much.

"The virtual mech market is oversaturated in designs. The Young Blood is a decent mech, but it will only peak in the first week, and only in the local star sector. Once the game pulls your product from its recommendation page, your sales will likely plummet. You can expect a constant trickle of sales from that point, but not enough to get excited about."

Her realistic outlook on the situation sobered Ves into regaining his calm. While he indeed struck gold by releasing a good design, in the end he was still an Apprentice Mech Designer. His skills could not compare to the established crowd of designers who released superior mechs in their sleep.

"I understand." He replied. "The virtual community is not my primary market. It is merely a means to an end. My true purpose remains selling physical mechs."

"That's good. For a moment, I was worried whether I made a mistake in contracting you. How soon will you finish your redesign?"

"I'll start working on it next week." Ves responded after a moment. He wanted to milk the DP streaming in from his ongoing sales bonanza as long as it lasted. "I'm still in the preparation phase. The longer I wait, the better the end product."

"Don't turn your delay in an endless hiatus. You know what happens to designers who constantly put off their work."

Ves already knew the dangers of such behavior. Leemar spent a lot of effort hammering the lesson into him. "My timetable hasn't changed too much. I can afford the extra week."

After discussing some business, Ves ended the call and proceeded to plan his schedule for the week. "There's not much I can do to prepare for the Dortmund project without further documentation. Perhaps I can check into the Clifford Society. It's been a long time since I visited their Mission Hall."

He still sought to obtain an alloy compressor and a chemical treatment machine. Besides taking another costly credit loan, he could also exchange them for merits. Unfortunately for Ves, merits were rather hard to come by.

Chapter 124: Streamer

His mech broker's prediction came true, once again proving that she knew her business. At the end of the week, Ves sold more than twenty-thousand virtual mechs. Most of his customers came from the Republic, curious to see what a mech designed by a fancy apprentice to a mystical master looked like.

Overall, his customers appreciated the Young Blood. They called it a hidden gem and an underrated mech. His sales received a second boost when the variant's only gold label mech got resold someone else, who proceeded to donate the machine to a fairly popular streamer.

Emily Norford, known online as EmStar, made a living out of streaming her performance in games like Iron Spirit. Though she was a potentate, her aptitude scores placed her on the lower end of the scale.

No one except pirates wanted to sign her on as a mech pilot, so she turned to Iron Spirit to satisfy her mech cravings. Due to her inconsistent controls, her performance dilly-dallied between Gold and Silver League, which was rather low for a girl in her early twenties.

She nonetheless attracted a major following of viewers and fans. Each time she streamed from her personalised simulator pod from home, she earned thousands of credits in donations. This came on top of the generous subscription fee she charged for extra benefits such as exclusive interviews.

The reason why Emily attracted so many viewers was simple. She was hot. Her genetic aptitude for piloting mechs might come up short, but she certainly won the lottery when it came to looks. Even without any makeup she always attracted everyone's eyes. She ruthlessly took advantage of this and invested into gaming.

Nowadays, EmStar consistently ranked in the top 100 in the Bright Republic. She might be nothing special outside her state, but the locals all found her to

be an adorable player. Her fellow citizens cheered when she won a match and booed when someone stomped her into the ground.

Watching her overcome try to overcome her genetic limits was like watching a kitten try to climb up a step just out of reach. Her audience pitied her and encouraged her while drooling at her skintight piloting suited form.

Everyone knew a possibility existed where a pilot could spontaneously break through their current genetic aptitude. Those who scored an E could reach the level of a D. Those who toiled for years as an average pilot with a score of C could break through the level of a B.

Even EmStar knew her odds of breaking through wasn't optimistic, but she tried her best each and every day.

She came across the Young Blood's gold label mech when a regular viewer abruptly gifted her account with this mech. The female streamer thought little of the gift since she received at least a couple of donated mechs a week on average. Still, she smiled to the camera and gave her thanks even as she read the details of her latest acquisition.

"Wow, this knight is apparently a limited edition mech designed by one of our Republic's own!" Emstar announced while she put up a projection of the model's appearance and specs. "The model is a variant of the Hoplite, one of my favorite mechs. The Hoplite is slow but easy to pilot."

She frowned a little when she read that the mech had been redesigned to increase its speed and flexibility. She preferred to pilot slow and heavy mechs which placed less importance on mechanical control and neural responsiveness.

After a few minutes of introducing the mech, Emily finally entered the cockpit. She looked around and seemed impressed by the comfortable chair. That

certainly wasn't standard. Her virtual avatar pressed the activation button and sat back as the mech came to life.

An explosion occurred in her mind. For a moment, she thought her simulator pod had glitched. She quickly calmed down once she realized the pod's diagnostics showed green. No pain accompanied the hard-to-describe sensations happening in her mind.

The mental connection process continued until she found herself in control of a seemingly well-oiled machine. "Sorry guys. I got distracted by this mech. It's quite a rush!"

Emily eagerly tested out her mech. The Young Blood moved rather sluggish on account of her inferior aptitude, but the chat exploded into shock as Emily slowly practiced her routine.

She forgot all about the audience as she once again repeated her moves. The knight responded well to her commands. It made her feel she was piloting a top-quality mech. A strange fog of calm blanketed her enthusiasm.

"There's no better way to put this baby to the test than to see it in action."

The woman hungered for battle. After queuing up for a 50v50 Wartorn Instance match, she continued to test her mech.

First, she tried the augmented dash. Emily yelped for a moment as her mech's feet suddenly sported claws and dug into the ground. Moments later, the mech flew forward with implacable momentum, leaving a sharp trail of red in her wake.

"This dash is more powerful than I thought! The stock Hoplite isn't capable of reaching this distance. I'm also able to maintain my balance during the movement. This mech is remarkably well-designed!"

She also tried the shield bash a number of times. The bash hadn't changed, but the shield released a pressurized cloud of smoke from the sides when hitting something solid.

"My sensors automatically switch when I complete the bash. It's a good way to confuse opponents if they are solely using the visible spectrum of light."

While the emission of smoke had little practical effect, it looked damn cool and made her feel she was performing a special move. A number of viewers quickly decided to buy the Young Blood mech on that account alone.

The match locked in a moment later. Emily's mech disappeared from her personal space and reappeared in a waiting area filled with fifty mechs of all shapes and sizes.

She recognized none of the nicknames hovering above their heads. She currently played in the Silver League, which opened up matchmaking to the rest of the galaxy, though a slight regional bias was still in effect.

Emily ignored the player sporting the crown trying to boss everyone else around. In the Silver League, most pilots were kids who all had a better idea on what to do. Instead, she interacted with her audience before the start of the match cut the instantaneous transmission of her stream.

The game mandated a delay in any streaming broadcast in order to prevent an active player from spying on their opponents in real time.

The delay varied between game modes. For the huge Wartorn Instances game mode, that delay ran up to five minutes, which was why most streamers preferred to play duels. Minutes-long delays broke up any attempt to hold a conversation with their audience.

Fortunately, Emily had enough loyal fans to stick around her stream and watch the commercials, many of which she personally showed up.

Sponsorship made up another portion of her income.

Once the hatch opened up, the gaggle of mechs exited and spread out over an alien planet. The alien foliage and strange animals made it clear that the planet had not been terraformed. Dense clusters of hills and caves hid behind the exotic foliage, offering mechs an alternate approach to their team's various objectives.

The goal of Emily's team was simple. They had to capture and hold three out of five different exotic mineral mines. They were all spread equally over the battlefield, though their team could only take possession of the mines if they held the tunnels.

Many artillery and aerial mechs bemoaned the underground tunnels. They still had a use on this map, but the real stars consisted of mechs specialized for close to medium-ranged combat.

As a knight, Emily's mech attracted a random assortment of players who wanted to take advantage of her shield.

"You're a knight, right? Can we tag along with you and hide behind your huge round shield?"

"No problem. I can use some guns to cover my back. Just be sure not to move in front of me."

Six mechs chose to let her take the lead. The motley collection of mechs traversed the alien jungle en route to the closest mine. They all moved at the pace of their slowest member, which in this case turned out to be Emily's mech.

No one could help it. A knight always moved slow due to their plentiful armor. Several flying mechs flew over their heads. Her squad members released some pot shots in their direction but the fliers already disappeared over the hills.

"Stop shooting!" Someone hollered over their voice channel. "You're wasting ammo and revealing our position to boot!"

"Sorry."

After ten minutes of careful navigation, they reached the site of their first objective. The tunnel looked natural instead of excavated, which meant that they might be facing uneven terrain and strange turns.

"EmStar, please take the lead. These tunnels are only wide enough for two mechs walking abreast. That leaves us with just enough space to shoot around your sides."

It also left her as their squad's punching bag, but Emily often ended up with this role anyway. She sighed with her lovely face and resolutely piloted her Young Blood into the natural cave.

Everyone switched to alternate vision modes such as night vision or infrared. It painted their vision in various monotones that leached the color out of their moods as well. Everyone kept their mouths shut as they anticipated danger.

At least they didn't have to worry about a tunnel collapse. The game occasionally turned essential parts of the terrain invincible in order to even the odds, but only in the lower leagues.

Just as they approach the mouth of a wider cavern, their world turned bright as a barrage of lasers and shells hit the Young Blood's shield. The heavy shield held up against the barrage, though the yellow lotus flower painted onto its surface lost half of its petals.

"I'm counting four heat signatures!"

"There's another one activating close! It's a heavy knight!"

Emily's entire squad cursed their luck. The heavy knight conveniently blocked the mouth of the tunnel like a cork in a wine bottle. Without eliminating this heavily armed mech, they stood no chance in taking the mine.

"They're one mech short compared to us. We can still make it through." Emily said, trying to motivate her squad members in committing to the assault.

"Are you crazy? Our weapons have no chance of punching through their shield!"

"If we can't break through our enemy's front, then let's go take them out from behind!"

Normally, Emily might vacillate along with the rest. Somehow, her usual panic was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she piloted her knight like a veteran and responded to the situation with the ease of a professional. Her viewers who watched her stream on delay praised her uncharacteristic decisiveness when she resolutely jumped into the fray.

A second volley of beams and projectiles impacted her shield. The damage ruined its top layer but did affect anything else.

The Young Blood jogged its way forward as fast as possible while her squad members belatedly followed behind her. They began to return fire, which largely splashed ineffectually against the enemy knight's oval shield.

It kept the enemy knight pinned down if nothing else. Emily squeezed her delicate hands into fists and drove her mech forward, not even noticing she moved her mech with fluency above her aptitude.

"What are we going to do if we get close?" Another female pilot asked with uncertainty tinged in her voice. "That heavy lug is blocking our way. None of our mechs have the necessary throw weight to dislodge him from his position."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Let me take care of that." Emily replied. She already planned her next moves. Right now she was figuring out what to do after she brought her squad into the open cavern.

Before they could ask how a medium knight could possibly push around a mech that vastly outmassed her, Emily already started to shift her mech. The Young Blood raised its sword over its head, as if preparing to chop the enemy in front.

In response, the heavy knight raised its oval shield higher in order to cover its head.

"Just as planned." She called, and bent her mech's legs.

The Young Blood accumulated a substantial power in its oversized leg muscles. The artificial muscles creaked when subjected to pressure. The mech also oriented its torso so that its shield faced the side, ready to be brought up to the front.

Emily mentally counted down until she reached zero. Her mech turned into an enormous blur as it took off from standstill. The red streak of vapor partially obscured everyone's sights as the Young Blood dove towards the unsuspecting heavy knight.

The heavy mech did not expect its opponent to enter his range this quickly. The pilot lacked the mental preparation to do anything else but keep up the shield.

The Young Blood did not slow down and attack its opponent with a sword. Instead, it bashed its round shield against the larger oval shield of its adversary. Like the mech itself, the shield moved faster than it ought to, and the yellow smoke emitted from the shield sowed further confusion.

If the heavy knight properly braced for a full collision, then it might have only skidded a little backwards. Instead, the rapid speed in which the Young Blood

moved caused the unprepared mech to stumble several steps away. Though the mech sustained little damage, the collision succeeded in rattling the pilot.

Though Emily's mech received some form of damage to its shield arm, the young woman already executed her next steps. Her mech's strengthened legs halted the rebound and allowed the brand new knight to move past its opponent's flanks. The heavy knight belatedly tried to slash Emily's mech, but only bounced off its battered shield.

"Shoot the heavy! Now!"

"You're still in our line of fire!"

"Do it!"

Emily's allies reluctantly fired at the heavy knight, wary of accidentally hitting her mech. The Young Blood ignored the risks of friendly fire and instead weaved around the heavier knight, looking for an opportunity to threaten its vulnerable rear.

The opposing ranged mechs followed suit with even greater care. The medium mech moved fast enough that their shots risked going wide and hitting their ally.

The assault from multiple angles confused the heavy mech. It didn't know which side to face its shield and its ally's near-misses also added to the chaos. The pilot eventually decided to use the oval shield to block the enemy fire.

"Big mistake!" Emily said as her eyes sparkled with the gleam of a correct prediction. Her mech's powerful legs allowed it to shift its direction at a sharp angle, almost coming up to the heavy knight's flank before its pilot could bring up its sword.

Emily's first attack crashed against the flat of the heavy knight's blade. While the heavy successfully fended off the attack, the force behind the blow caused it to stagger just a tiny bit. This gave Emily an opening to slip her mech's sword past her opponent's weapon and puncture the mech.

Her sword only sunk in shallowly as the heavy knight's armor was not for show. Emily frowned a bit. For a moment, she expected the stab to sink into her opponent's armor and draw blood. Shaking her head, she regained her composure and struck again and again, this time going for speed instead of power.

The heavy knight did a decent job in fending off the flurry of attacks. Emily did her best to get past the heavy knight's guard, all the while withstanding the raking strikes from its allies with the round shield.

The fight turned into a mirrored battle of attrition, but Emily knew her mech would break first. The Young Blood's shield couldn't last as long as the oval shield. With decisive deliberation, she stopped defending against the lasers and shells that targeted her mech and swirled her mech around.

The round shield emitted another burst of yellow smoke as it crashed against the heavy knight's sword arm with augmented force. Despite the brief windup, the bash successfully pushed away the sword, allowing Emily to stab underneath the enemy mech's armpit.

Only a limited amount of armor protected the vulnerable joint. The Young Blood's sword succeeded in punching through, though the sheer amount of components inside halted its advance shortly afterwards.

While the arm remained functional, the limb lost a substantial amount of power and speed. The heavy knight found itself unable to keep up with the Young Blood's follow-up attacks. Emily systematically dismantled the heavy mech like a butcher slaughtering a pig.

The heavy knight completely forgot about its comrades and let itself be pushed out of the way.

"Go on! Get inside this cave and hunt down the others!" Emily yelled to her squad mates. "Let me take care of this knight!"

She maintained her assault on the heavy knight, which responded by putting up its near-indestructible shield. Like a turtle retracting into its shell, the heavy knight gave up the chance to win and sought to last as long as possible.

Emily obliged her opponent by continuing to hammer against its shield. Bit by bit, the oval shield started to crack. She didn't expect to break it on her own. Instead, she kept her opponent in place while her squad used their superior numbers to demolish the remaining enemies.

After losing two of their own, her squad members returned to finish off the heavy knight. The poor mech tried to hug the cavern walls and hide its profile behind its shield. Everyone laughed as its shield couldn't cover its fat and bulky chassis.

"Good work EmStar." A mech slid over from the side and planted its feet on the heavy knight's wreck. "This tough bastard is a hard nut to crack. I'm surprised your mech is able to push this beast a few steps back. Did you plan all that or did you just roll with whatever came to your mind?"

"I don't know." She admitted. For some reason, she felt empowered while she piloted this mech.

Most of her difficulties in controlling her mechs became muted this time ever since she entered the virtual cockpit. Emily felt as if she received a blessing. She performed all of her limited sword moves with more assurance and speed than before. Even her viewers who watch the previous battle on delay admired her increased fluency.

Even more viewers started to take a second look at the Young Blood. There must be something about the mech that turned a bad pilot into a decent killing machine.

As for Emily, the remainder of their squad successfully occupied their mine. Due to its proximity to their headquarters, the enemy team never mounted an assault to take it back. They focused instead on maintaining their grip on their three nearest mines.

Eventually, Emily ordered all the other mechs to leave the cave and let her stay behind. "The assault on the third mine isn't going well. They need your firepower."

"What if the enemy diverts a squad to this mine? You won't be able to beat any squad that comes in your way."

"They won't come." Emily said with conviction. "They already lost a bunch of mechs. They can't afford to lose another squad of mechs."

Reluctantly, they parted and went their separate ways. The Young Blood stood quietly as it stood in the dark. No one else kept Emily company except her own mech.

Her pressing heartbeat slowed down. She breathed evenly. Coming back from her combat high took a lot of effort. Emily invested a lot more into the battle than she thought.

The reinforcements turned out to come at a very helpful time. The ranged mechs had circles around and attacked the enemy mine from an alternate tunnel.

They struck in coordination with the main assault force.

The defenders received a nasty shock when their reserve endured several painful volleys an unprotected flank. The small disruption grew into a major

breach of cohesion as the defenders tried to defend against attacks from multiple directions.

Chapter 125: Massive Spending

Emstar's higher than average performance when piloting his gold label mech propelled his sales past the ten thousand mark. Ves owed a lot of DP to her free advertising. Her influence in the Republic's gaming circles might not be the best, but her endorsement was worth a lot more than a hundred ineffectual commercials to an ad-weary society.

Ves even sent her a thank you note, though he doubted she could dig it out from her fanmail.

During the first week of the Young Blood's release, Ves made the rounds in the Clifford Society. He talked with a few of the knights who hung around the Moon Library. He found out that the Society was split up into numerous factions led by different Masters.

As an apprentice aligned to the Vermeer Group, Ves respectfully declined when he received invitations to attend their meetings. The factions open to cooperation with outsiders persisted with their attempts to draw Ves in but he kept his mouth shut.

Instead, he found some kinship with some of the neutral Knights who admittedly had little prospects of advancing. One older gentleman called Lavrey gave him some perspective.

"Master Olson walks with a particular crowd of people called Unionists. She represents a set of interests that seeks to integrate the Friday Coalition into a single, cohesive state. As you can imagine, not everyone seeks to have their culture and way of life subsumed in a tide of conformity."

"For all the effort I spent on staying out of politics, it turns out I've inadvertently joined one of their camps." Ves lamented. He didn't regret the apprenticeship

even if he hadn't benefited from his master's personal guidance yet. "So are you suggesting that I should be more proactive?"

"No. You're still too young. Nobody is interested in an Apprentice Mech Designer. You still have a long way before you turn into a Journeyman Mech Designer. That's when the industry considers you mature enough to exert some influence."

None of this was his business anyway. He instead asked him how he could earn a lot of merits.

"Besides the Mission Hall? There's no other source than trading something valuable with your fellow Society members. You can also donate knowledge and research that our library lacks, though don't get your hopes up on that."

Ves already lost faith in getting an easy mission from the Mission Hall. Emergency missions were too scarce to come by, and it seemed that the most prominent Knights received a warning beforehand should any such mission crop up soon.

"So, there's no other way than to trade something valuable."

"Why do you think there's so many stores down in the city? Those Knights who opened storefronts have all found a way to earn what they need through leveraging their own assets."

He already had a backup plan. If he still couldn't find a mission, he'd open a store and try to peddle some of the exclusive items from the System's Store or Lottery.

The DP the System charged for most of its goodies was high, but anything became less of a problem when you had enough wealth. Ever since his Young Blood became a regional hit, Ves held on to his DP and started scouring the Store for anything rare and unique he could trade for lots of merits.

He could even buy entire machines like an alloy compressor or a CTM, though he had to pay millions of DP to afford the cheapest systems. The System was a downright snob and refused to sell any products that fell short to its expectations.

Even if he bought something precious, Ves had no doubt people would start asking questions if he tried to exchange them for cash or merits. Something as unique as Lucky's gems could spark a galaxy-wide manhunt for him due to their impossible effects.

Due to his increasing paranoia and his need to protect the System, Ves bought an upgrade to his comm that could help him keep his secrets.

[Comm upgrade - Privacy Shield - Level 1]

Price: 10.000 Design Points

Insert this datachip into any comm to upgrade its ability to block all manner of electronic surveillance, such as sensors, recorders, implants and other devices. This function will only work upon activation, and can only be sustained as long as the comm supplies sufficient energy.

The first level of the Privacy Shield emits an obscuring field of interference that blocks out any emissions from a 2-meter radius from the comm.

"Ten thousand DP. I can upgrade four skills from Apprentice to Journeyman with that much points." Ves regretted a bit, but he reminded himself that the Privacy Shield was essential going forward.

Even his workshop ceased to be a bastion to him. With Sanyal-Ablin's upcoming upgrades to his security suite, he could pretty much say goodbye to whatever remained of his privacy.

It also didn't help that Ves found out that the Konsu Clan hosted the security company's headquarters. It explained why SASS enjoyed a good reputation

for honesty and adhering to the rules. The people living under the rule of the Konsu Clan always kept their promises, so Ves did not tear up his contract yet.

Ves stretched his arms after logging out of the Society's virtual portal. He stood up and briefly checked on Carlos, who seemed to have progressed halfway into mastering the Marc Antony. After patting his employee's back, he sauntered over to his bathroom and sat down on the toilet.

He activated his Privacy Shield, which caused a hazy electromagnetic storm to buzz from his comm. It no doubt scrambled any micro-cameras that might have been sneaked into his bathroom stall.

Once SASS brought their security suite online, he had no doubt that they'd catch bugs like these. For now, Ves could only rely on the System.

"Finally, some peace and quiet. Okay System, show me the money. Status."

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 40.210

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: An apprentice at the start of his true journey to greatness.

Every time he sold a copy of the Young Blood, he earned five DP from the System. With his current sales, he should have earned more than 150.000 DP. Instead, his DP stopped growing when it reached 50.000 DP.

"You cheapskate System. You didn't mention anything about a limit."

The System capped his point earnings for every single virtual design. For a 1-star mech design, that roof was set at 10.000 DP, while a 5-star design reached the limit at 250.000 DP.

If he received all of the DP he rightfully earned, then he could have strengthened himself enormously. It cost 100.000 DP to upgrade a Journeyman skill to Senior-level, though he also had to fulfill some other demands such as completing a special quest.

Still, leaving aside his previous purchase, Ves already raked in a fortune by accumulating 40.000 DP. He didn't expect to earn so much points again. Only a combination of factors such as the interview, the trending market page and the endorsement from a streamer allowed his product to gain such prominence.

"I'll have to make the most of my current points."

Ves had a tendency to go crazy whenever he earned a windfall of DP. Having learned his lesson, this time he waited for an entire week before he began to spend his precious points. He extensively studied the Skill Tree and Store and constantly weighed his options without committing to any purchase. It took a will of steel to keep his shopping cart empty.

First, he resolved to maintain a minimum balance of 10.000 DP. He could purchase a lot of gadgets with this much DP that could get him out of trouble. Having endured two pirate attacks already, Ves no longer thought that only others suffered accidents.

Ves previously skewed most of his spending towards skills, and while they remained essential, it was too unbalanced. He had other needs as well, and with the recent upgrade to his System upon his advancement, the Store sold a lot more useful products.

He therefore split the remaining points into three separate pools. He reserved 10.000 DP for upgrading his skills, 10.000 DP for upgrading his attributes, and the remaining 10.000 DP for purchasing other goodies.

First, he went for the easiest purchases. There wasn't much choice in upgrading his attributes, so he mainly bought intelligence candies.

[Intelligence Attribute Candy]: 1.300 Design Points

[Intelligence Attribute Candy]: 1.400 Design Points

[Intelligence Attribute Candy]: 1.500 Design Points

[Intelligence Attribute Candy]: 1.600 Design Points

[Intelligence Attribute Candy]: 1.700 Design Points

[Intelligence Attribute Candy]: 1.800 Design Points

[Dexterity Attribute Candy]: 700 Design Points

He needed to upgrade his intelligence the most. Despite the escalating price for each additional candy, Ves decisively snapped them up until he almost drained his budget. He rounded out his spending by buying a marginally useful Dexterity upgrade.

"It's not that the other attributes are useless. Concentration helps me maintain my intent when designing or fabricating a mech. I'm almost convinced a higher concentration is needed to score better on the X-Factor."

Creativity also helped with forming a strong source of inspiration for the X-Factor.

Despite these advantages, Ves could not allocate too much resources on a strong but ultimately supplementary benefit. Intelligence formed the foundation of his ability to solve problems and absorb new knowledge. He specifically chose to upgrade his intelligence first before he stuffed his brain with lots of new skills.

Ves stared apprehensively at the colorful candies that materialized in his palm. "Hey System, can I ingest all of the candies at once?"

[It is recommended that you limit your ingestion to one category at once, and only up to a cumulative growth of 1.0 a day.]

"Right. Let's start with the lone Dexterity candy to be sure."

Ingesting a candy caused his body to feel hot as his muscles experienced a strange sensation. The phenomenon quickly faded. He figured his body had already been primed to upgrades ever since he injected his body with Master Olson's gene boost.

After flexing his arms, Ves noted that his movements became more precise, but only barely. He still scored below average, so the overall benefits were still too insignificant.

As for intelligence, he underestimated the power of the candies. Despite his gene boost, he still lost consciousness when he popped the candies into his mouth. The six life-changing pills dissolved into his body and guided an enormous amount of energy to his brain.

When he woke up hours later, he had to reassure both Carlos and his security detail that he merely fell asleep on the toilet. It quickly turned into a joke, which hopefully deflected any other suspicions.

He still suffered from a headache, though. "It's like there's a thousand elephants pounding inside my head."

Most of the aches subsided after a good night's sleep. Only then he realized how a score of 1.8 made a difference to the way he saw the universe.

The increased Intelligence did not improve his wisdom or his decision-making. It left his personality alone, but enhanced his cognitive skills. He could solve complex equations in his head, recall a text he read a day ago and puzzle out the meaning of a difficult textbook page.

Ves also suspected the massive boost to improve his ability to design a mech. It sped up his application of theory and allowed him to solve his problems with a lot less brain churning.

"Is this how those geniuses felt when they designed their mechs? I feel so powerful."

He doubted that most of the designers he competed against could match his current level of intelligence. Only few individuals still made him pause, such as Edwin McKinney, Patricia Schneider and Master Carmin Olson. Will he ever reach their heights someday?

[Please do not celebrate so quickly. A human body can only sustain an attribute up to a height of 2.0. You will not be able to increase your attributes beyond this score with attribute candies.]

He cursed a little. The System ruined another of his devious plans. "What about gene boosts? You haven't mentioned anything about them. Will I be able to increase my attributes past 2.0 if I'm not a pure human anymore?"

The System predictably declined to answer, but Ves was convinced he was on the right track.

With nothing more to go on, Ves turned to acquiring new skills. After entering the toilet again, he turned on the Privacy Shield and entered the Skill Tree. He already assembled a laundry list of priority skills. It still left him with over fifty highly regarded choices.

He first defined his goal. "I want to obtain the skills needed to improve my Marc Antony design and reconstruct a working Dortmund printer."

After a moment's consideration, he chose to branch out his specialties instead of shoring his foundation. With his improved intelligence, he could easily upgrade his lowest ranked skills as long as had access to the right textbooks.

In contrast, it was a lot harder for him to get ahold of the more obscure pieces of knowledge. The Clifford Society locked those kinds of books behind a wall of merits.

[Melee Weapon Optimization I]: 500 DP

[Melee Weapon Optimization II]: 1000 DP

[Directed Energy Weapon Optimization I]: 500 DP

[Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II]: 1000 DP

The weapon optimization sub-skills acted similarly to the armor optimization ones. They did not enable Ves to design his own weapons and armor, but granted him a large amount of handy insights on how to improve existing ones. It taught him what to watch out for and how to avoid the usual pitfalls.

Mech designers usually acquired these skills through experience due to their lack of unifying theories. Ves found it worthwhile to spend DP to acquire them instantly.

Due to his recent increase in intelligence, he hardly felt any pain this time when he acquired and absorbed the skills. "Intelligence also acts as a load-bearer for all of my knowledge. My mind is a lot roomier now. I'm able to process a large amount of information at a time."

Acquiring these set of optimization skills opened his eyes. His new knowledge already pointed out numerous subtle mistakes he made in his designs that degraded the performance of their weapons. He resisted the urge to reopen the Young Blood design and optimize its ability to wield a sword.

"Instances like these makes me feel like an idiot. I'll have to boost my Mathematics and Physics to Journeyman before I start my next project." He reminded himself, having opted not to spend any DP on those essential skills

when he could easily leverage his enhanced intelligence to make up for it in other ways.

[3D Printer Proficiency III]: 800 DP

[Assembler Proficiency III]: 800 DP

Ves intended to upgrade his main Assembly skill after the redesign, but for now he found it prudent to upgrade his proficiency sub-skills. Like the optimization skills, they worked by granting Ves the combined experience of a veteran fabricator.

The many things he had to keep in mind also indirectly improved his ability to design a mech by making it a little easier to fabricate, which should no doubt make Carlos happy.

[Alloy Compression II]: 2000 DP

[Structural Pathway Configuration I]: 1000 DP

[Structural Pathway Configuration II]: 2000 DP

Upgrading his Alloy Compression sub-skill seemed wise even as his Marc Antony still lacked the capability to make use of it. Ves still lacked a compressor and CTM. Even if he had them, alloy compression only worked with a limited number of rare and expensive exotics.

Only the mechs piloted by elites made use of this technique. The regular frontline models of a third-rate state did not make use of compression due to a lack of resources.

He had a lot more use for Structural Pathway Configuration, which was an expanded version of cable management for mechs. The internals of the Marc Antony still remained a mess. The only way to alleviate the congestion was to tear it all apart and start from scratch.

The sub-skill also played a role in his upcoming reconstruction project. The Dortmund printer was a massive, complex web of sub-systems intricately bound by various connections. These cables, feeds and pipes required extensive care, as they were relatively fragile.

After digesting all of his gains, he summoned up his Status again to admire his accelerated growth.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 20.610

Attributes

Strength: 0.8

Dexterity: 0.8

Endurance: 0.8

Intelligence: 1.8

Creativity: 1

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

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

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Apprentice - [Structural Pathway Configuration II]

[Mathematics]: Apprentice

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

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression II]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

[Physics]: Apprentice - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II] [Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization III] [Melee Weapon Optimization II]

Abilities

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

Evaluation: An apprentice at the start of his true journey.

Chapter 126: Level Up

After spending his DP like a drunken tycoon at a casino, Ves only had 10.000 DP in his budget. While he considering splurging the entire amount on lottery tickets, he quickly reconsidered.

"My luck is rather inconsistent. I don't want to take any chances at this moment."

He opened the System's Store page and called up his wish list.

At this moment, Ves mainly sought to keep the Mech Designer System a secret. With enough credits, he could buy all manner of fancy gadgets. The only thing he couldn't readily buy with credits was a way to obscure his expanding use of the System.

[Anonymous Parcel Delivery System - Level 1]

Price: 10.000 Design Points

Range: 1 star sector

Dimensions: 1cm x 1cm x 1cm

The APDS is a sophisticated transportation device that can teleport any cargo to an unmonitored area within its range.

The description left much to be desired, but Ves got the gist, especially with his enhanced intelligence. The small device was somehow capable of instantly teleporting any object placed inside its tiny interior across many light-years.

The capacity of the box was tiny. It only had enough space to teleport a datachip, one of Lucky's gems or his nail clippings. It also drained a lot of power everytime it initiated a teleport.

Ves mainly considered purchasing the APDS due to its ability for him to remain anonymous when he traded something sensitive, like Lucky's gems. He still had to come up with a way to remain untraceable when he communicated with his clients, so until then he had no use for this item.

"Let's look at something else."

[Small Anonymizing Stamp]

Capacity: 1 cubic cm

Price: 10.000 Design Points

This specialized stamp can permanently mark any object with a special ink. The stamp has the ability to hide the special characteristics of object that receives a stamp. The SAS is only capable of affecting an object with a maximum volume of 1 cubic cm.

[Anonymizing Ink - Small]

Amount: 1 single-use cartridge

Price: 100 Design Points

This ink can be used by any compatible stamp or device to anonymize an object, thereby hiding their special characteristics. Enough ink is supplied to apply 1 small stamp.

The stamp and its separately supplied ink could completely obscure any object smaller than a single cubic centimeter. This meant it could obscure the origins of one of Lucky's gems as well as a normal-sized datapad.

The parameters only cares about the volume. This technically meant he could stamp a stick as lengthy as a shuttle as long as it was very thin and very narrow. The stamp worked as long as the object offered a large enough surface area.

"Let's go with these stamps." He decided after a moment's consideration. "The items down the list are also useful, but right now it's important to cover my tracks going forward. If I still want to make use of Lucky's gems, I have to obscure their effects."

As long as Ves applied a tiny stamp, no one would suspect the activation button of the mech to affect the machine in a mysterious way. The only downside to using the stamp was that he had to spend 100 DP for every stamp. It turned each physical mech sale a net loss in terms of DP.

He tapped his lips and weighed the costs. "I can still earn back the points when I design another virtual mech. It's more important for me to raise the performance of my premium mechs. The higher their specs, the more my fame will spread. I'll limit the use of Lucky's gems to gold and ruby label mechs."

The mass production mechs fabricated by Carlos did not deserve to be graced with a special gem. "A cheap synthesized gemstone will do."

Ves bought the stamp and a single cartridge of ink. He stuffed them both into the pocket of his antigrav clothes for now. "I should add secure storage to my shopping list."

After Ves finished his shopping, he went back to work. First, he returned to the Clifford Society's virtual portal and entered the Star Library. He scanned the most advanced Apprentice-level books and grabbed a generous selection.

He then proceeded to read them rapidly. Any Society members that walked by might think he was merely skimming the pages. In truth, with his improved cognitive abilities, he was able to understand most of the theory fairly quickly.

During his reading marathon, his comm discretely beeped. Dietrich finally sent over the thirty-five million credits from the sale of the blackmail material they found at the abandoned base.

"Took you long enough." He said. He first sent the promised twenty-five million credits to SASS. This left him with a total savings of thirty-two million credits. "It's not much of a stash, but I've got enough to spend on some additional books."

In order to accelerate his learning, Ves resorted to the open market to get his hands on Journeyman-level books. The books available for sale in the public might not be as good as the ones in the Moon Library, but at least he didn't have to spend his valuable merits.

Ves indulgently stuffed his comm with two million credits worth of virtual textbooks. He wasn't satisfied with any of them, as the pedigree of the authors fell far short of those whose works were included in the Moon Library.

"Well, beggars can't be choosers."

He essentially tried to advance his main skills by brute force. His enhanced intelligence allowed him to make sense of even the most opaque descriptions.

His improved concentration also helped by keeping his focus on track. It took a lot of effort to maintain his interest in his studies.

Slowly but surely, his strategy paid dividends. By combining quality Apprentice-level books from the Star Library with the awful Journeyman-level books from the galactic net, he eventually broke through. He reached Journeyman in both Physics and Mathematics two weeks later.

"Finally, I'm done!" He screamed in the air. He tiredly rubbed his eyes and stood up from his terminal. He walked over to Carlos to see how much progress he made so far. "How many successes?"

"Just three so far." He shook his head as he kept his focus level on the assembler. Trying to stuff the mess of cables and components into a limited space without breaking anything always eluded Carlos so far. "This mech is just too damn finicky with its internals. The three intact mechs I've fabricated so far are complete flukes."

Funding his first employee's fabrication spree also took a toll on Ves. He expected Carlos to master the process now that more than a month went by. What he saw instead was Carlos tripping over the last hurdle over and over.

Ves stretched out his palm. "Okay, this clearly isn't working. Just stop."

"I'm sorry Ves. I thought I could master it, but this darned design is too insane."

"You should see the original Caesar Augustus. That one is at least fifty percent harder to put together. In any case, there's no use for you to work on either designs. They're too advanced and too complex."

"Then what should I do next?"

Obviously Ves didn't want Carlos to sit on his thumbs waiting for him to finish his redesign. "Go ahead and practice on my virtual mechs for now. You need

to get the hang of fabricating all kinds of mechs. Start with my 1-star designs like the simple Nomad and work your way up to my 3-star Young Blood."

"I'll be sure to master the Young Blood once you're done with your redesign." Carlos promised him. He knew he screwed up.

"That's good, because some of the design principles I've used in the Young Blood will carry over to the Marc Antony Mk II. By the way, the Young Blood also makes use of compressed armor, so you should skip that step as usual until you are ready to learn its principles."

Alloy compression was an extremely sensitive and dangerous process that could go wrong in many ways. At best it could ruin a batch of multi-million credits worth of exotics. At worst, the entire compression machine might blow up.

Ves still had to find a way to automate the production of compressed armor plating. One of the reasons why he hungered for the Dortmund was that it could link up to a good quality alloy compressor and fabricate compressed plates in a single session.

After settling his fabricator's new training, Ves left the workroom and entered the area where Lucky previously hibernated. The glowing blue ball winked out a few days ago and left a sparkling new mechanical cat in place.

His pet clearly benefited from the unidentified piece of ore from Master Olson. It must have been worth quite a lot, but without any headway into figuring out its use, Ves had no regrets in passing it on to Lucky.

"How are you buddy? Have you recovered from your sleep?"

Lucky tiredly meowed at him while brushing its burnished bronze exterior with his tongue. Ves bent down and scratched his mechanical pet between the ears. He admired Lucky's shiny new exterior and examined his status.

[Pet Status]

Name: Lucky

Owner: Ves Larkinson

Rank: Gold [Exclusive]

Level: 2

Skills

[Gem Excretion II]

[Energy Claws I]

Lucky already gained the ability to claw through armor from a previous gift. His cat did not gain anything special this time when it consumed the ore. Instead, his cat leveled up. Ves understood that as an upgrade to its core functionality. The cat grew a little tougher, faster and maybe smarter.

His exclusive Gem Excretion ability also advanced. Any gems that Lucky excreted from now turned into real treasures. Compared to the pitiful gems that Ves had stuffed in a safe, the newer gems should be twice as strong.

Ves already looked forward to what Lucky might 'produce'. He already had his Anonymizer Stamp in hand. "It's getting dangerous these days. Don't go excreting your gems into the woods without me next time. Let me raise my Privacy Shield first before you do your business."

Lucky lightly smacked his hand with his paw, as if expressing his dissatisfaction.

"Don't be like that Lucky. I already have a huge shipment of tasty ores in my storage room."

That certainly perked up the cat. Lucky rose from his bed and raced out of the living room in a hasty scramble. Ves scratched his head. Did his cat even know how to open the locks?

He followed after his overeager pet and opened one of the drawers for him. He only withdrew a modest chunk of minerals for his cat. He didn't want to see his cat grow fat.

"Take your time, Lucky. I've got plenty of stock ready for you to devour." He cooed, already thinking about the small mountain of gems his pet could excrete.

Having taken care of Lucky's dinner, Ves left the living room and exited the workshop.

Underneath the ever-present clouds, a highly automated construction force fortified the perimeter. The bots already removed the flimsy electric fence. Sanyal-Ablin's workers already measured out an expanded square of fortified walls. Large glowing pillars of light marked the locations where they planned to place the turrets.

Ves approached the construction foreman. "Any problems?"

"None that requires your attention, Mr. Larkinson. The soil here is softer than we anticipated, so we will have to treat it along the way. We're also having difficulties in obtaining our permits from the Freslin City Council. Without their say-so, we aren't allowed to install our heavy turrets."

"I see." Ves thinned his lips. He forgot about the local government in his expansion plans. "What kind of objections have they mentioned?"

"Well, nothing. They don't outright reject our applications, but they are letting them hang in limbo. This seems strange because there aren't any other major projects that is going on that can explain the delays."

The foreman didn't spell out his suspicions directly, but Ves got the message.

"Do I need to pay a visit to the city hall? Remind them that there's a time sensitive project waiting for their approval in my yard?" Ves asked as he tried to figure out a way to exert his influence on the government without ruining his relationship with them. After all, he still enjoyed a privileged status.

"It may help. It's rather strange. Normally our name is enough to cow the local bureaucrats. Our managers suspect that someone else is directing their obstruction."

That was great. "Do you know if the mastermind is from the Republic or from the Coalition?"

"You'll have to speak with Miss Robyn for that. My guess is that it's a foreigner who's stuck their hands into the pot."

"Okay, thank you for informing me." Ves said and tipped his head to the helpful foreman. "I'll dig into this immediately."

"Thank you, Mr. Larkinson. The longer this goes on, the more it will cost."

Ves grumbled a bit. Who thought that with his status, a local still dared to mess around. He could forgive a politician or a bureaucrat who opposed him for a good reason, but this naked obstructionism benefited no one but the shadow behind the scenes.

Chapter 127: Permit

The Bright Republic governed a suburban planet like Cloudy Curtain with a light touch. The planet lacked any form of large-scale industry and their system had no asteroids worth mining. In such a dirtball of a planet, the Republic generally took a hands off approach. As long as nobody entertained traitors, foreigners or aliens, the government could care less what you did.

That was the theory at least. Ves stormed past the construction site and entered his workshop with stomping steps.

His visit to Freslin's city hall accomplished nothing. With a little digging, he found out the Director of Planning handled the city's permit applications. Ves wanted to meet with Director Balcai, but after an hour of fruitless arguing he couldn't even get past the secretary!

"I don't need this problem." Ves muttered as he sank down on his couch. A sated-looking Lucky sauntered over to his lap and sank down in a cute little slump. Ves absently stroked the cat's smooth bronze-colored back. "If you were facing a stuffy director, what would you do?"

Lucky merely continued to swish his tail in utter bliss.

"Okay, I get it. You're too lazy to address the problem."

Sadly for Ves, he couldn't bury his head in the sand. If he let Director Barker have his way, who knew if he came the next morning with a notice that forbid commercial activity? He had to draw a line in the sand.

"I can't do anything alone, but I've got friends who can help."

He came up with three different parties who might lend a hand.

First, he could contact Horatio for assistance. The current situation reeked of Coalition influence. If he involved Master Olson's faction early, the other party might back off.

The only problem with this option was that he might be calling in the big guns to address a trivial issue. Horatio might lend a hand anyway, but then Ves cemented his reputation as a useless designer who couldn't take care of his own messes.

"Best leave Horatio as a final option. My current situation hasn't gone so far to warrant his intervention."

Next, he could turn to the Larkinsons. His uncle Ark commanded a lot of respect in the Mech Corps while his grandfather Benjamin worked in the

Ministry of Defense. Both of them wielded a substantial amount of influence in the military affairs of the Bright Republic.

These connections also became a shackle to the family. Ves knew that his family members always tried to stay away from overt politicking. They might have strong opinions when it came to the disposition of the Mech Corps, but outside of that they kept their mouth shut.

If Ves called in his family, he might inadvertently throw them into a political minefield. "I'm sure they can help, but I'm not sure whether my opponents already prepared a nasty surprise for us."

That left Walter's Whalers. The local mercenary gang recently returned to Cloudy Curtain in a triumphant mood. Mr. Walter himself led the expedition himself and salvaged every nut and bolt from the abandoned base that Ves and Dietrich stumbled upon. The Whalers beat off several curious mercenary corps who wanted in on the action.

The Whalers returned home a little battered but with very few casualties. All of the scrap had already been sold to a few interested parties from Bentheim. Mr. Walter currently sat on a mountain of credits worth roughly half a billion credits.

As the person responsible for making their enormous haul possible, Ves could easily ask a favor from Dietrich and the Whalers. As the locals, the Whalers were best suited to liaise with the local government. That was if Ves ignored the contentious relationship between the two. The Whalers also had a tendency to act unbridled and without tact.

"They might even punch the living daylights out of Director Balcai!"

None of these options sounded good. Ves belatedly realized that if he wanted to grow his business, he had to secure his political flank. If he continued to

ignore the bureaucrats and politicians in charge of administering the planet, his company remained vulnerable to their predations.

"I need a political advisor."

Ves never really paid much attention to the local politics. Cloudy Curtain always seemed to be governed by the same set of parties. The coalitions that ruled the local city councils and the planetary government changed every few years.

He didn't have much more of an understanding than that, so he rather wanted to dump this mess into someone else's lap. Ves knew his limitations.

Since he had to solve this problem quickly, Ves did not bother posting his job offer on the galactic net. Instead, he first studied the affiliations of Freslin's City Council.

"Looks simple enough." Ves remarked as he read through the brief biographies of the mayor and the directors. "Mayor Davidovich is a member of the White Doves while Director Balcai represents the Greens."

The White Doves advocate for keeping Cloudy Curtain as boring and static as possible. They drew most of their support from elderly migrants from Bentheim who hated the hustle and bustle of the busy port system.

The Greens on the other hand formed a core interest group of the deeply rooted locals. They wanted to preserve the unique and tranquil environment of Cloudy Curtain and detested any form of heavy development.

Of all the groups who could stand up to them, Ves favored the Pioneers. They advocated for a prosperous and well-developed Cloudy Curtain where everyone's living standards reached the level of the Republic's upper-tier planets.

The Pioneers also fought a generations-long battle against the stodgy two parties who wanted to keep Cloudy Curtain impoverished. Despite their support for growth, they primarily stood up for the poorest who still lived in crumbling apartments and second-hand shuttles converted to mobile homes.

As a backwater, Cloudy Curtain lacked the economic development to ensure everyone enjoyed the services they were entitled to. The only reason why the Pioneers hadn't taken control of the government was that the Greens and the White Doves enjoyed entrenched support from the wealthiest segment of the population.

It all sounded stupid to him. He only gathered enough information to know that he had to find someone who could help him establish a relationship with the Pioneers. Fortunately, as a local, Ves was familiar with the local hangouts. He knew just the place to go.

The Heritage Cafe pretended to bring a slice of Rittersberg to downtown Freslin. Placed conveniently next to Freslin University's campus, they drew a regular crowd of up-and-coming youths who dreamed of making it big.

When Ves opened the old-fashioned wooden door and walked inside, half of the patrons turned to look at him. Despite his common-looking face, his business suit gave off an aura of understated elegance. He specifically configured his antigrav clothes to come across as a young but successful entrepreneur.

He looked around but couldn't spot any obvious member of the Pioneers. Shrugging, Ves took a seat next to the window and ordered a cup of locally cultivated coffee.

Agriculture comprised of Cloudy Curtain's largest sector. Its stable, temperate climate and unpolluted air allowed for the cultivation of many authentic crops

in natural conditions. The huge amount of produce harvested every year kept the upper class of Bentheim fed with natural food.

As Ves calmly sipped his beverage, he kept his ears open. He distinguished multiple conversations, most of them concerning their schoolwork or the latest mech duels. He eventually honed in on a specific conversation between a girl and her boyfriend. He grabbed his cup and walked over to the pair.

"Hello, I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Are the two of you related to the Pioneers?"

"I'm a committee member of the youth division." The woman proudly said.

"Don't mind my man here. He's a political illiterate."

"Hey! Just because I don't pay attention to such nonsense doesn't mean I'm stupid!"

"Shush now, Remon."

The young woman turned out to be Calsie Doornbos, a law school student. When Ves introduced himself, they looked dumbstruck.

"You're that mech designer who showed up in every broadcast a few months ago!"

It took some time for them to calm down. Once Ves explained his problems and why he sought the woman out, Calsie frowned a bit.

"If there's evidence that Director Balcai is taking his marching orders from the Coalition, then he could be charged for treason. In practice, stuff like that is notoriously difficult to prove. You have to be aware that Freslin's City Council is not in favor of increased industrialisation. They can truthfully say that they are enacting their existing policies."

"They aren't rejecting my application outright. They are delaying it endlessly."

"That means that they still have scruples. If they deny you a permit, then they'll be leaving a record that others can use to whack them over the head. You're one of our planet's most prominent new citizens. It doesn't look good for them if they appear to be picking a fight with you."

Calsie possessed a good awareness of what went on in these circles. Ves wanted to make use of such an astute and knowledgeable person.

"Are you willing to work for me?"

"Excuse me?"

Both Calsie and Remon were stunned that Ves offered the woman a job out of the blue.

"I'm honored, Mr. Larkinson, but I'm not sure it's a good idea. I'm still a student. I still have some years left before I graduate."

"I'm not looking for a lawyer, not yet at least." Ves quickly reassured her. "I'm merely looking for a political advisor or fixer who can help liaise with the local government and the Pioneers on my behalf. It will largely be an informal, part-time job that only requires a couple of hours per week to fulfill."

"What if there's nothing going on, and everyone else is staying quiet?"

"Staying quiet doesn't mean that I'm safe. I'd like you to receive a weekly report from you that details whatever is going on in Freslin and Orinoco that's relevant to my mech business. Is that something you'd like to do?"

"What's the pay?"

"How about two-thousand credits a month?"

"Deal!"

For the amount of work Calsie expected to do for Ves, the salary completely satisfied her. She already followed the local politics like a junkie. Getting paid to continue her hobby sounded like a great deal.

"Alright. Let's exchange contact details and I'll send you an employment contract later. Right now, I'm kind of in a hurry, so I'd like you to take care of something for me."

"You want me to handle your stalled permit problem?"

"Right." Ves nodded. He activated his comm and selected some documents in its storage. He then waved his hand at her, initiating a transfer of files to her own comm. "Please read them over so you can formulate an approach. Remember, I don't want you to act like a wrecking ball. Just smooth over the problem without sparking a feud."

"You do know that I'm a known member of the Pioneers. I doubt the Greens and White Doves who are ruling in the City Council will appreciate my presence."

"They could have left me alone, but they deliberately pushed me away from them. Who else can I turn to?" Ves sighed and crossed his arms. "Mind you, I'm not joining your camp, but I think there are plenty of ways we can cooperate. One of the reasons why I decided to hire you is because I want to establish a channel with the Pioneers."

They discussed a bit more of what Ves expected Calsie to do. Everything had to be legal and aboveboard, though Ves did not mind if she used her own connections to get something done.

Once they gained a thorough understanding with each other, Ves left the cafe and returned home to take care of the paperwork. He sent over a contract an hour later, which she quickly signed and sent back. With that done, Ves sat back on his chair and looked at the ceiling.

"Hopefully I picked the right person as my second employee."

Ves might have been a little hasty hiring a random student off the street, but he did not want this matter to stretch out. If Calsie turned to be all bark and no bite then he'd simply fire her and call Dietrich.

Chapter 128: Two Layers

Calsie called back two days later. She enlisted the help of the Pioneers in putting pressure on the City Council. Ves interrupted her explanation and only wanted to know if she got his permit.

"Well, the short answer is yes." She said. "It should have gone into immediate effect by now. "

To verify her words, Ves stepped outside. The bots and construction workers from SASS had picked up their work and were beginning the long and difficult process of installing and entrenching the heavy turrets.

"Work has resumed. Looks like there are no more barriers in my way."

His advisor warned him not to let his guard down. "There will be inspectors keeping an eye on your property in order to make sure you don't exceed the specifications laid out in your application."

"That's fine. As long as the City Council steps aside, they can watch all they want."

Ves appreciated her efficiency. Even if she did not do much on her own, she proved to be a valuable contact who could leverage the Pioneers on his behalf. Certainly, they might pay a visit to him in order to ask for a favor, but that was the way the universe worked.

His new employee passed him a warning. "I've been doing some snooping around, and there's an undercurrent of dissatisfaction regarding your decision to base your company on this planet."

"What kind of excuses are they throwing around?"

"The White Doves are afraid that someone as prominent as you will attract raids from pirates or enemies who have a bone to pick with you. The greens are dissatisfied with the increase of interstellar traffic and the pollution they bring when they transport your goods."

Calsie made it clear that the local politicians weren't done with him yet.

"Will they be ambushing me with anything else in the next two months?"

"Not as far as I'm aware of. The likelihood still exists. I think the Doves and the Greens are taken aback at your sudden courtship with the Pioneers."

"That's good. You can pass on to the Pioneers that I'm open to collaboration. Right now, I'm occupied with a very important project. I'll be largely indisposed for two months."

After passing on a couple of instructions to his new advisor, he ended the call.

He smiled and stretched his arms. "Now that there are no more distractions, it's about time I start with redesigning the Marc Antony."

He loved Marc Antony. As his first commercial design, he fabricated two physical mechs and sold them to two different customers. Those mechs were still in use today, causing Ves to feel a strange form of parental pride.

"I brought those mechs to life with my own two hands. They are my children in a sense."

His sentiments made him reluctant to change the design. Such an act proved he lacked faith in his own work and that he found it necessary to correct its shortcomings. This mental barrier pushed Ves to keep finding excuses.

Still, if he continued to procrastinate, then what was the point of taking this profession? "I can't aim for perfection all the time. There's a time when I have to draw the line and say it's enough."

Ves did not have the luxury to indulge in endless study and indolent diversions. He had to run a business. No matter how many virtual mechs he designed, the real universe only cared about physical mechs.

"Let's get to work. First, I'll have to draw up a schedule."

He opened his terminal and split his redesign project into several chunks.

First, he planned to spend an entire day to developing and refining a focused intent.

He dedicated three entire weeks to revamping the mech's entire internal structure.

After that, he allocated two weeks to revamping and optimizing the mech's armor.

The week after that consisted of tweaking and optimizing the remaining self-contained components such as the engines, power reactor, cockpit as well as the weapons.

Once he finished going through all of the components, he planned to subject his design to a barrage of tests for the next two weeks.

"Looks like a decent schedule." Ves nodded to himself as he drew back.

"Hopefully, three weeks is enough to finish the enormous task of creating an entirely new internal structure."

Ves recently gained the Structural Pathway Configuration II sub-skill for this task. Still, he never specialized in Electrical Engineering, and only managed to reach Apprentice-level through the System. He did not wish to delay this project any further in order to spend a month in trying to raise it again.

He shook his head and redirected his thoughts to establishing a strong image for the Marc Antony Mk II.

In hindsight, Ves realized he constructed a rather chaotic image for the Marc Antony. After untangling the jumbled mess he initially composed, he realized he combined three separate images into one.

The first image consisted of the appearance of an Ancient Roman Legionnaire. He started with the standard knight form from the Caesar Augustus and adjusted its appearance to look like a Roman soldier. The most significant change was that he took the base model's kite shield and added enough bulk to turn it into a hefty tower shield.

The Roman Legionnaire contributed strongly to the defense portion of the image. The inspiration invoked a trust in the shield, a sense of martial discipline and a grit that never faltered.

The next image related to the names of the variant and its base model. Jason Kozlowski originally named his mech the Caesar Augustus due to its prominence in taking up an inspirational leadership role on the battlefield. Ves kept to the theme by taking the name of the Roman Emperor's defeated rival Marc Antony.

As an image, the name evoked a strong sense of daring and the willingness to seize opportunities. This fit with the style of a cavalry general, whose formations changed the course battle with a well-timed charge.

The last component had to do with the mech's intended role. As an advanced mech and a hybrid knight, the mech served as a pivotal lynchpin in the battlefield. It combined the defensive stance of a knight with the offensive tendencies of an aggressive frontline leader.

He slipped in the last image unintentionally. Ves tentatively concluded he added this last one in due to his exuberance in creating his first production design. The hybrid knight acted as the glue that bonded the two previous images together in a coherent whole.

From the information he gathered and the guesses he made, Ves came to a tentative conclusion on how to evoke the X-Factor. He couldn't prove his hypotheses, but he figured it didn't hurt to adjust his mindset.

"There's two layers to it. The primal layer absorbs the essence of my intent. It distills the most complex images into its core components."

For example, when he formed the inspiration of a Roman Legionnaire, the primal layer stripped all unnecessary elements. It only preserved the overarching meanings embedded in the image, such as defense, discipline and grit.

The second portion that made up the X-Factor consisted of the conscious layer. Ves only inferred the existence of this layer when he studied a lot of replays of past matches. The Unicorn, Marc Antony and Young Blood all exhibited signs that they affected the conscious judgement of their pilots.

"Can an image actually come to life this way?"

Ves grappled with this question. It sounded impossible. How could figments of his imagination develop a conscious mind? "The X-Factor doesn't make sense in the first place."

Without deriving the theory on how the X-Factor operated, Ves could not draw upon humanity's existing understanding of the universe. He had to watch out for coloring his assumptions with unconscious biases. Researchers who studied alien technology specifically learned to detect and mitigate their prejudices.

Only his instincts hinted that he was on the right track. Ves imagined what it meant if his guesses panned out. "If there's two layers to the X-Factor, then there might be a third or a fourth, just waiting to be discovered."

All of these were fanciful thoughts that Ves had no way of uncovering now. He shoved aside the matter and set his sights on working with the two layers he identified so far.

"There's an issue." Ves slowly realized as he formulated an optimal model for the X-Factor. "The primal layer works best with strong simple concepts. The conscious layer on the other hands requires an extensive backstory in order to shape its personality."

The two demanded competing approaches. If Ves spent his time on focusing on a few key concepts and left the details vague, then the design would carry strong instincts but weak direction. If he flipped around his priorities, then his mechs could consciously assist the pilot but with a weaker boost to overall performance.

Both had their good points, and Ves believed a design could be strong in both. He just had to find the right approach.

"This is mostly a mental exercise, so as long as I have the right mentality, I can strengthen both."

That was easier said than done. Ves believed he owed his previous good scores for the Unicorn and Marc Antony due to his passion. If Ves stopped second-guessing every decision, he might be able to hold contradictory thoughts. In short, the key to maximizing his X-Factor was to hold a delusional mindset.

"I'm not about to get drunk or inject myself with stimulants in order to reach this state." He quickly decided. Those kind of shortcuts might work for artists, but engineers like Ves had to remain sober in order to work with precise schematics.

Ves had to refrain from going off half-cocked. He could try out his outlandish theories when he designed his virtual mechs. Since he intended for the Marc

Antony Mk II to serve as an active combat mech, he had the obligation to deliver a stable product.

"Let's settle for a basic approach. An advanced mech will generally be piloted by talented and experienced mech pilots. These kinds of customers benefit more from a boost in instincts than having a second opinion."

He had to remind himself that only professionals bought and piloted his mechs.

After all of this theory-crafting, Ves finally got down to the brass tacks. He sat back in his chair and spent the rest of the day with fleshing out the inspirations for the second version of his variant.

Mindful of his priorities, he focused mainly on strengthening the detail of their combat performance. The Roman Legionnaire became a gritty veteran of uncountable campaigns. Marc Antony demolish the Gauls under the direction of Julius Caesar. Ves skimmed the parts where they were not in battle.

When it came to the hybrid knight, Ves halted for a moment. "Can I even use an inanimate object as an image?"

It posed another interesting question. Without trying it, Ves had no idea if it was possible. According to his previous hypotheses, using a shield as an inspiration showered the primal layer with defense-oriented instincts optimized for shield handling.

Using a mech to inspire another mech sounded strange. Ves had the feeling the notion resembled asking whether the chicken or the egg came first. It posed another conundrum especially when the existence of the X-Factor presumed that mechs also lived.

Eventually, Ves concluded it might not be any harm to proceed with constructing a life around a hybrid knight. "I think all those passionate mech designers throughout history must have also imbued their designs in this

fashion. There might even be a form of self-fulfilling prophecy at work where the traits the designers wished for are actually expressed in their product."

It explained why some designs like the Caesar Augustus radiated faint auras. The mech designers in question remained ignorant to the X-Factor, so they never picked it up like Ves who at least reached Incompetent at Metaphysics.

"I can probably advance it to Apprentice once I test out all of hypotheses." Ves remarked, aware of the possibility of treading new ground. In the entire galaxy, perhaps only the creator of the Mech Designer System had walked this path.

Ves treated the matter of constructing an image around the hybrid knight carefully. He incorporated both elements of defense and offense, but his main focus laid in increasing the synergy between the mech and the pilot. Both were indispensable. If Ves had to pick a single concept to embody his thoughts on the matter, then it was trust.

The pilot trusted his machine to perform at its best, and to never falter.

The mech trusted his pilot to steer it right and treat it with respect.

Now that Ves polished the images into shape, he began the arduous task of holding them in his mind. His enhanced concentration worked overtime trying to keep the images distinct in his mind. He wrangled the three sources of inspiration into place and condensed them into a beam of focused intent.

He managed to hold this strenuous state for an hour, but no more. Ves had to rest his mind so that he could piece together his frayed concentration. That took at least ten to fifteen minutes.

"Looks like I'll be taking regular breaks once I start with the next phases."

Chapter 129: Architecture

Patricia set down her data pad that displayed the Herald's interview with Ves. She sat back on her perch overlooking a peaceful garden at a private island

on Leemar. The woman glanced at the projection of a familiar mech as it endured a ferocious missile bombardment.

"Now that you have studied the Young Blood, what are your thoughts, Patricia?" A female voice asked from the side.

Lyri Reywind, a foreign Journeyman Mech Designer under the employ of Master Null, popped a cultured grape-like fruit in her mouth. Since Patricia acknowledged the famed mech designer as her master, Lyri brought her up to speed. Patricia improved remarkably as she supplemented her solid foundation with a couple of intermediate skills.

"The construction of the Young Blood is not remarkable, though it is well-built." Patricia answered after organizing her thoughts. "The overall complexity of the knight type is fairly low, so it is not a large accomplishment for an Apprentice Mech Designer to achieve this result. I can only say that Ves has a strong foundation."

"Is that all you can perceive from his mech? If it is merely a good construction, then it shouldn't be generating the modest amount of buzz in the news."

"The weapon is solid but nothing special. The augments have been improved, but only marginally. The armor's contours have changed and the internal structure is a lot more flexible. Any pilot who steps into the Young Blood's cockpit will appreciate the vastly improved handling."

"These are factual statements that any decent mech designer can make when they compare spec sheets." Lyri admonished her junior while she shook her head in disappointment. "You are a talented mech designer, but you are still too sheltered. Don't look at the design with your brain. Instead, look at it with your heart."

Patricia looked befuddled. Her elegant eyebrows furrowed as she set aside all the numbers and statistics and focused solely on the projection of the virtual

mech in battle. She did not know the mech pilot on display, but thought that he or she performed like a natural on the battlefield. Was she looking at a professional?

No. The pilot's skill fell short. Instead, the mech moved fluently and decisively. Patricia did not spot the characteristic pauses and second-guessing of a pilot of this caliber. Now that she thought about it, many of the replays she reviewed had shown that every pilot performed close to their optimum without being burdened by various mental distractions.

"Is there something funny going on with the neural interface?"

"No." Lyri responded. "I've checked the design myself. The neural interface is a bog-standard model that hasn't changed a bit from the original Hoplite design. Think. What can affect a design's performance that does not show up in the schematics or spec sheets?"

"Design philosophy? That's impossible! He's only an apprentice, far from the level where a design philosophy should manifest!"

"The human race is endlessly varied. There are many exceptions to the rule. We lump in everything unexplainable into a concept called design philosophy because only few of us are able to exhibit phenomena beyond our understanding. Master Olson has a good eye for her to spot such a gem in the wild."

Normally, novices and apprentices have only vaguely heard about design philosophy. From their basic textbooks, design philosophy embodied a mech designer's understanding of mech design and signified their unique insights that no one else could imitate.

In truth, design philosophy embodied much more than simple understanding. Patricia knew a little more about the concept. Only those who developed their design philosophy past a certain point broke through to Senior and Master

Mech Designers. All others stopped their advancement once they reached the limits of Journeyman.

"Don't be discouraged, Patricia. Design philosophy comes with experience and learning. One must first learn to crawl before they can learn to walk."

"At what stage is Ves right now?"

"I'd say he's actually running the hundred meter sprint right now. There's no way he can keep this up without damaging his foundations."

"Then we should warn him!" Patricia yelled and brought up her comm.

Lyri cut the air with the palm, shutting off all signal traffic on the island. "Stop!"

"Why?!"

"Do you think his Master is unaware? A lesson only hits home when it hurts. When little Ves inevitably falls and trips, Master Olson will be there to pick up the pieces."

Despite her concern, Patricia had no right to interfere. Every mech designer had to seek their own truths and find their own path to greatness.

Back in Cloudy Curtain, Ves prepared to resume his efforts to revamp his outdated production design.

"This next step is going to be a pain."

The second phase of his redesign project consisted of revamping the internal structure or architecture of the Marc Antony. Ves did not intend to replace any of the existing components stuffed inside the mechs, though they were also the source of the problem. The Caesar Augustus used some of the best currentgen components available for licensing.

The engine, power reactor, weapons and more performed quite well compared to the competition. However, performance often correlated with

size, so they all took up more space than average. For a medium mech trying to stay within its weight class, this created an awful situation.

What Ves learned from his newly gained Structural Pathway Configuration sub-skill helped him understand the issue at hand. He got a sense of what the base model tried to accomplish.

Mech designers learned fairly early in their studies that they were brought up to design war machines. These mechs not only had to perform at their optimum when fully maintained, they also had to endure various debilitating conditions.

If a mech got its arm cut off, its systems adjusted by enacting some form of damage control. For example, the mech adjusted its balance and cut off any feeds and systems designed to interact with the missing arm.

If a shot snapped an important power feed to the arms, then the mech adjusted by routing power through an alternate path. These backup lines may not be able to bear the full load, but it at least insured the limb maintained a basic amount of functionality.

Both mech pilots and mech designers consider redundancy important. An easy but misleading way to determine a mech's overall redundancy was to look at their redundancy factor. Expressed in percentages, the RF summarized how much damage a mech could take before it started to lose performance.

Any mech certified by the Mech Trade Association had to meet a minimum standard of redundancy.

Heavy mechs always reached a minimum of 100% RF. This proved that all of its basic systems could be run on a parallel internal structure with no loss of functionality. This took up a lot of a heavy mech's internal space, but since they often acted as punching bags, pilots always wanted more.

Medium mechs only had to meet a 50% RF. The mech's critical systems such as its basic feeds between the power reactor, cockpit, engines had fully functional backups that could take over the transfer of power and data. Less essential systems had to make due without these redundancies.

Light mechs always had to do more with less, so a 25% RF already strained an average light mech. These kinds of paperweight mechs relied entirely on speed and evasion, so it did not have much use for redundancy in the first place. A single heavy hit could easily wipe out the main feed and all of its backup feeds at the same time.

Other factors also mattered when it came to mitigating damage, the most important of which was compartmentalization. When a particular section of a mech sustained a hit, ideally the damage only affected that portion. A well-designed internal structure contained the spillovers from both the source of the damage and any cascading faults such as follow-up explosions.

Same as redundancy, an MTA-certified mech also had to meet a minimum standard of compartmentalization, expressed in CF.

Unlike RF that for some heavy mechs reached as high as 300%, CF only had reached a theoretical maximum of 100%. The MTA mandated a CF of 10% for light mechs, 15% for medium mechs and 50% for heavy mechs.

Regardless of CF and RF, the MTA-mandated minimum only barely met the needs of mech pilots. Those who wished to purchase a more secure mech always sought out mechs with significantly higher margins of safety.

What Jason Kozlowki decided to do when he ran out of internal space astounded Ves. Instead of addressing the root of the problem by replacing his core components with more compact versions, he started cutting into his CF and RF.

Between the two, Jason evidently valued redundancy more. He tried to keep as much redundancy intact as possible by optimizing his design's internal architecture for space.

He basically removed a lot of internal dividers and active suppression systems that localized the damage. He also filled up the buffer space with more junk, causing many cables and feeds to squeeze together.

"What a self-obsessed idiot." Ves quietly cursed. "If Mr. Kozlowski's design team only had one fellow mech designer with a spine, then this travesty might never have come into being."

He had to make due with what he got. With the same core components already taking up a substantial chunk of space, Ves had to puzzle out an entirely new architecture that could somewhat raise the base model's dismal 17% CF while maintaining its 85% RF.

"A medium knight is considered decent if its redundancy factor is 100%. A hybrid knight is also expected to draw the enemy fire, so it a 50% RF is wholly insufficient."

Ves allocated three full weeks to come up with a cleaner internal structure. He got to work by drafting the basic pathways around the mech's internal frame and core components. Cables, feeds, artificial musculature and support structures slowly filled in the contours of his design.

Even this simple chore turned strenuous due to his need to maintain three images at once in order to nurture the X-Factor. He shortened his sessions to forty-five minutes in order to prevent his mind from slipping into an abyss each time he overdrafted his focus.

The changes in the routine succeeded in lowering his stress. Ves tentatively added more details to the schematic when he overlaid the primary channels with additional ones. He only started straining his mind once the gaps started

filling in. Ves had to be a little more inventive and a lot more patient to figure out his solutions.

Most of the work at this stage involved a lot of trial and error. Every time he came across a bump, he had to try out 999 different solutions before obtaining one that didn't suck.

It also happened to be the ideal whetstone for Ves to get used to holding three images at once. As two weeks slowly went by, Ves became more proficient in flexing his mind.

He did not increase his Intelligence or Concentration attribute in any measurable way. Instead he learned to utilize his existing strengths closer to their full potential.

In the final week, Ves finished over 98% of his desired end state. Sadly, the final two percent seemed incredibly tough to complete. His completely revamped internal architecture looked neat, clean and incorporated a lot more buffer space. Along with employing some other tricks, his design used up about five percent less space while raising its overall endurance.

Ves managed to raise its compartmentalization to 29% while maintaining a redundancy of 81%. The vastly increased CF ensured that any damage his mechs sustained remained limited to the affected portion.

The original Caesar Augustus did not have to worry so much about this issue due to its excellent compressed armor. Since the Marc Antony incorporated the cheap and disposable HRF armor system, Ves had to ensure it kept running if the mech sustained severe damage.

"After hundreds of thousands of simulations, I'm finally done with this matter." He sighed as he released his concentrated state. By now, had become accustomed to holding three thoughts at once, though it always remained somewhat challenging.

He already invested much of himself in this project. The Marc Antony Mark II had to exceed everyone's expectations in order to generate sufficient sales. Only through selling physical mechs could he earn enough money! No matter how many virtual mechs he designed, they never earned him more than a million credits.

Chapter 130: Mark II

Calsie walked past the newly installed walls and turrets with a nervous gait. No one stayed calm when they had to face those ferocious defenses. Various bots patrolled the grounds, making sure to inspect the college girl when they hovered close.

After receiving a final inspection from a uniformed security officer, she finally got to enter her new employer's workshop. Compared to the deadly gleaming turrets, the interior appeared much more down to earth.

She quickly reached a living area where a handful of couches, tables and even a drinks dispenser occupied the room. Ves already sat at one of the couches and gestured her to take a seat while he petted a marvellous-looking mechanical cat.

"Please take a seat."

"Mr. Larkinson, I have your report for the month." Calsie said and slid over a secure datachip. She could have sent it through the galactic net, but considering the sensitivity of the information she put it in a hardcoded form first.

"Give me a summary. Anything going on that I should know about?"

"There are hints that another player from Bentheim has entered the field. A very wealthy corporation is making inroads with the White Doves."

"Have you determined their identity?"

"From what my contacts in the Pioneers have inferred, it's likely to be the Ricklin Corporation."

Ves stopped petting his cat, causing the animal in question to meow in indignation.

"The Ricklins. Sure enough, they're thinking about taking revenge." He sighed, and scratched Lucky's head in order to placate his cat. "A traitor used my second-ever fabricated mech to wipe out at least half of their upper echelon. Shouldn't they be consolidating their assets and reorganizing their ranks?"

"Turmoil is still wracking the Ricklin family, but support is building up around a young genius of the family. The chaos is expected to end as soon as the last holdouts accept a compromise."

"Great. So I'll have to deal with two sources of outside pressure. Not only do I have to worry about the tiger next door, but I also have to guard against the distant meddlers from the Friday Coalition."

Calsie tried to reassure her employer. "Don't underestimate the central government. Cloudy Curtain is one of the many satellite planets that surround Bentheim and keeps their influence in check. Rittersberg will not allow Bentheim to take effective control over one of their critical food sources."

The Bright Republic benefited a lot from the Bentheim System. The population on its only inhabited planet swelled to ridiculous proportions, to the point where its own domestic agriculture couldn't feed their hungry mouths.

"Hopefully you're right, but you never know what might happen in the future."

With all the unrest and terrorist attacks, no one cared about improper influence. If Ves wanted to ensure his safety on the political front, then he might have to bring in outside influence on his own after all.

"Bringing in my family will still tarnish the Larkinson name." Ves concluded.
"Involving the Whalers should be my nuclear option."

With nothing else to report, Calsie left after a short talk with Ves with new instructions. Since his troubles only started, Ves expressed interest in joining the Pioneers.

"I can't remain half-hearted and ignore political realities. If I don't join their circle, I'll remain vulnerable to their whims."

Despite what went on, he still had a job to do. Ves resumed his work on the redesign project. He spent a week on developing a highly adjusted armor scheme. To be frank, he could not find many opportunities to improve over the original design. There were only so many ways he could employ the HRF armor plating with his current skills.

Even with his improved skills, Ves was not able to raise any parameters without making tradeoffs. For example, if he wanted to increase the flexibility of the arms, then he could shave off some armor, thus increasing their vulnerability.

If he lost more than he gained, then he simply needed to reorient his goal. More armor? More speed? More flexibility? Not possible! Then what if Ves focused on something he hadn't paid attention to? After a few minutes of consideration, he settled on reducing the armor's complexity.

His current armor scheme consisted of many complex shapes. A flat square plate was the simplest piece of armor a fabricator could produce. What about a plate with a curve? The person who fabricated this plate had to reproduce the curve to its exact contours down to the millimeters.

Ves tried to simplify these shapes as much as he could without affecting the armor's overall performance. It worked up to a point, as Ves never took complexity into consideration before. Though the design unavoidably lost a bit

of performance, he successfully reduced the failure rate of fabricating most of its parts.

This might not matter too much to Ves. He knew his design intimately and could fabricate its parts with sufficient confidence. He did it so others were able to do the same without falling flat.

"I've already untangled much of the internal structure. With this, Carlos shouldn't have too much trouble."

After finishing his draft, he subjected the schematic to a barrage of simulated tests. The reduced complexity opened vulnerabilities in his design that slightly lowered the armor's ability to withstand certain kinds of damage.

Ves easily patched most of the holes. Only some needed more attentive care as Ves had to reintroduce some complexity.

When Ves finally reached the end of the armor phase, he sighed and relaxed his concentration. "Armor is supposed to be one of my secondary specialties. It's disgraceful if I can only bring up the armor to this extent."

He was in no shape to design a mech. Ves took a day off in order to clear up his mind. He never enjoyed a full day of relaxation, so he made the most of it. While Carlos diligently mastered the last of his virtual designs, Ves played around with Lucky and browsed the news.

Much of the news revolved around the recent chaos and the steps the Merc Corps took to respond. They increased their procurement and called in some of their reserves. Everyone knew this was just the prelude.

"This is the time when mechs are selling like hot cakes. I have to push my product out as fast as possible if I don't want to miss out."

The next day, Ves returned to his work with a renewed sense of urgency. He spent the next week making adjustments to the self-contained parts. Due to

his lack of expertise, he only brushed through most critical components like the engine or power reactor.

Instead, he spent an entire day on customizing the cockpit. Ves wanted to stimulate a better response to the X-Factor by setting the right mood. He changed the shape of the chair and adjusted the displays. He also carved the entire metal compartment with ancient-looking sculptures that alluded to the inspirations for the design.

If nothing else, his customers might appreciate the luxury.

With that done, he turned his attention to the mace and shield. His new Melee Weapon Optimization sub-skill allowed him to recognize that he made a lot of mistakes with the weapon. He deleted the mace and brought back the CA-1's original sword.

"I can't use the same sword shape that's optimized for compressed alloys when I'm actually using an uncompressed alloy."

Ves drastically modified the basic sword shape until he made it shorter but thicker. Without access to a compressor or better performing alloys, he had to resort to various tricks in order to make the most out of the uncompressed HRF alloy.

After finishing the sword, he touched up the shield. He introduced a moderate amount of complexity by applying some creative layers, but other than that it remained a simple rectangular slab of metal.

He tweaked the other weapon systems as last. He adjusted the contours of the missile launchers so that they meshed a little better with the shoulders.

The wrist laser cannons required a lot more work. With his newly acquired Directed Energy Weapon Optimization sub-skill, he recognized various vulnerabilities.

The laser cannons faced a major issue. The HRF's heat capacity simply couldn't compare to the original armor system. Ves had to thicken the wrists in order to prevent the wrists from overheating too quickly. It took two entire days to graft new heat channels in order to spread out the excessive heat generated from a rapid fire rate.

At the end of the phase, Ves dedicated the last hours to optimizing the Festive Cloud Generator. He reduced the size and energy consumption of the joke component in order to minimize its impact to the mech's performance. He also distinguished the vapor crest on the head head by running the distinctive pressurized mist through some lights.

"I'm finally done with this phase. All the components are in place. Up next is comprehensive testing."

After more than a month of redesigning, the revamped Marc Antony looked substantially more refined. The subsequent simulations subjected his new design in various brutal conditions. Ves extensively employed the System's models in order to find every possible fault. The holistic tests exposed various stress factors that in some cases crippled the mech.

Ves had to tread carefully from this step onwards. He encountered many instances where one fix led to another issue. Sometimes he had to revamp an entire section in order to address the root of the problem.

"Two whole weeks of simulation, and it's still not enough." He declared after an enormous amount of repetitive testing. By now he only caught minor glitches that only really came into effect in extremely rare conditions. Without a better proficiency in modeling, Ves reached the limits of what he could expose.

He had reached the end of the road. Ves not only invested eight whole weeks into designing the Marc Antony Mark II, he did it while maintaining three separate images in his mind.

Ves looked forward to the evaluation. He squirreled to his toilet and setup the Privacy Shield before bringing up the System.

"Tell me System, what's your verdict?"

[Design Evaluation: CA-1C2 Marc Antony Mark II.]

Variant name: CA-1C2 Marc Antony Mark II

Base model: Caesar Augustus CA-1

Original Manufacturer: National Aeromotives

Weight Classification: Medium-Heavy

Recommended Role: Shock Trooper

Armor: C+

Carrying Capacity: D

Aesthetics: A-

Endurance: D-

Energy Efficiency: C-

Flexibility: E+

Firepower: B-

Integrity: B

Mobility: C-

Spotting: C-

X-Factor: C+

Deviance: 62%

Performance improvement: -23%

Cost efficiency: +62%

Overall evaluation: An acceptable variant of the Caesar Augustus. Though very lacking in its armor compared to the base model, it has achieved an admirable amount of cost savings over the original model. The second version of this variant has turned it into a commercially viable design.

[No rewards are issued when updating an existing design.]

"Yes! I did it!" He celebrated. Not much had changed at first glance, but Ves instantly recognized the differences.

The deceptively unexciting evaluation hid a lot of surprising bombs. First, he successfully raised the X-Factor's rating. From C- to C+, it indicated that holding three images at once and using a mech to inspire his design did not result in catastrophic errors.

"It's still a pain to repeat this method without improving my concentration. I'm also unsure if I'm heading in the right direction. If I increase the amount of inspirations, it becomes increasingly difficult to meld different meld together. At some point the X-Factor will simply scatter."

No matter the case, Ves uncovered a lot of avenues for further research. Previously, his total lack of understanding prevented him from doing any focused research. Now, he was brimming with questions.

Integrity also received a major improvement. After all the work Ves had done to increase the Marc Antony's compartmentalization, he deserved the compliment. His design could finally tough it out in the field. Even if its armor got breached, the Mark II could still fight on, though Ves didn't recommend such a reckless act.

The third surprise came from the final two ratings. His various optimizations reduced the material needs to fabricating the mech. Most of the cost savings came from developing an improved internal structure. Reducing the complexity of the armor also helped out by reducing the frequency of producing faulty parts.

In the end, it came down to performance. The Marc Antony Mark II thoroughly eclipsed the base model except for armor. Ves still found it a pity to miss out on compressed armor.

"Still, my mech is a solid performer now. It might not compare to a genuine advanced mech, but it's still a decent bargain."

Since the costs hadn't grown at all, Ves could go in two different directions with regards to pricing.

If he raised the asking price, he could earn a lot more credits per sale.

If he kept the price the same, then he'd surely be able to generate a lot more sales for his improved mech.

Ves shook his head. "Marcella is in charge of my sales. It's largely up to her to set the price."

Now that he finished the arduous task of designing the Mark II, Ves deserved a well-earned rest. He basically took no notice of the outside world for eight straight weeks.

It was time to stretch his legs and see how everyone fared.