

Chapter 211 Last Spear

Ves didn't feel like spending additional credits on additional virtual component licenses. One of the problems of the DarkSilver design was that it allocated the majority of its space on enhancing its active stealth systems. It contained precious little space for any other systems.

Most of the variants he'd seen took the FFL-25 and added alternate loadouts. Instead of a piddly little knife, the other mech designers mostly provided their variants with limited-use weapons that delivered a large amount of damage in an instant such as bombs or acid containers.

To be frank, Ves considered employing the same means, but he held off because he wouldn't add anything new to the game.

In addition, the solution seemed like a cheap cop-out that turned its back on the original intent of the DarkSilver line. The players who buy the variants mostly use them to sabotage the enemy base and supply depots instead of assassinating enemy mechs.

"Why are there so few variants that retain the DarkSilver's original purpose?"

A handful of ambitious mech designers tried their hands at 'fixing' the FFL-25. Their attempts either enhanced the base model's strength while sacrificing its stealth capability, or they preserved its stealth but made only marginal improvements in its strength.

Obviously, all of the mech designers who worked with the frame failed to find the silver bullet that circumvented the base model's limited capacity. The oldest 4-star designs originally came out about a hundred years ago, which severely limited today's designers from introducing modern innovations.

The most successful variants therefore eschewed the stock design and rebuilt it from the ground-up. They used the same components and the same

materials but rearranged them into a completely different package that delivered substantially higher performance in some areas.

Not a lot of these redesigns existed as it required a lot of work for very little payoff, since assassin mechs never sold as much as mainstream mechs. However, this in turn gave Ves an opening for him to introduce something others hadn't done before.

"It's a lot like designing an original mech in a sense."

Letting go of the boundaries of the base model freed Ves from its restrictions but also gave him room to stumble. Nevertheless, Ves didn't shy away from the challenge.

First he had to set a vision for his variant. In his eyes, an assassin mech didn't require protective armor. It avoided damage by virtue of its stealth systems and its speed. The base model mostly emphasized the former and paid only lip service to the latter.

"Let's focus on speed and momentum."

The conventional assassin mech sneaked up on their targets at an opportune moment and landed a lethal blow. Once they finished the deed, they popped their chaff and snuck away during the confusion.

"Just like the Old Soul in a sense."

His 2-star sniper mech became known for its devastating ambushes and slippery escapes. This proved that the strategy worked, but Ves didn't wish to retread the same old path.

Instead, he envisioned an assassin mech that used its cloak not to get into point-blank range, but to position itself for a short but devastating charge.

The beauty of this modus operandi was that Ves only had to ensure that his design possessed enough speed and acceleration. The arms and torso didn't

need any special attention. As long as they held up at the point of impact, his assassin mech should be fine.

In essence, his variant relied on its running start to build up enough momentum to punch through an unsuspecting mech's armor. A weapon that enabled the mech to transfer its force into a single point worked best in these circumstances, so Ves immediately decided on pairing his design with a spear.

"The only problem is that the mech can't maintain its stealth while running."

Faster movement came with more vibrations and more disturbances in the air. It became vastly more difficult for its active stealth systems to suppress the deluge of signals.

Ves had no solution to this problem, but it shouldn't matter too much. In his imagination, he envisioned his assassin mech using its cloak to sneak in close to its target, but not too close to get detected by its passive sensors. These usually became more effective the closer anyone tried to sneak up on their backs.

Instead, his assassin mech stayed just out of detection radius and readied itself for a charge. At the decisive moment, it rushed forward and closed the distance within seconds before ramming its spear into the vulnerable back of its target. After delivering its blow, the assassin mech ran away at full speed.

"It's going to be risky for the mech to survive without any form of chaff." He judged.

The escape should be the most difficult phase of the assassination process. While he could fit a small chaff module onto his variant, it would likely affect the effectiveness of its stealth. Thus, he decided to leave it out of the picture and focus solely on stealth and speed.

Now that he established a clear vision for his design, he began to construct a set of images for this Triple Division technique.

First, he set the base role as an idealized version of his assassin mech. Ves simply added in his vision for his design and imaged more scenarios on how it should be used.

The most important job for the base role image was to enhance the compatibility between the X-Factor and the actual mech. It didn't need to be too strong or remarkable, but it couldn't be inaccurate.

Ves in fact possessed average creativity, but it should be sufficient to paint a detailed enough picture. It helped that his assassin mech possessed a one-dimensional playstyle. It revolved solely around the mech's ability to set up for a charge and escape when the deed was done. As long as it achieved perfection on this part, his design didn't need any added frills.

Next, he moved on to the totem animal for his assassin mech. He wanted to pick out a predator that perfectly encapsulated his design's ability to pounce at a target and get away quickly. Ves tried to come up with a standard Terran animal that fit its nature well.

"Let's go for a cheetah."

These large cats were favored predators that had often been genetically modified for various purposes. Their extremely fast sprinting velocity endeared them to various customers that liked to take advantage of this trait to hunt for difficult prey.

After browsing the galactic net, Ves found that the standard wild cheetahs exhibited different behavior in different situations. However, whenever it had to hunt alone, it employed a hunting strategy much like his assassin mech. Instead of stealth, it used various kinds of cover and concealment such as hills or tall grass to obscure its approach.

Ves liked the imagery the animal evoked, so he centered his totem animal around a solitary cheetah. With plenty of footage on the galactic net, Ves had no trouble constructing a vivid image of the cheetah at hunt.

Once he moved on to the final portion of the Triple Division technique, Ves had to be more thoughtful. The human myth portion of the technique required a lot of backstory in order to provide a lifelike human touch to the X-Factor.

He didn't pull off anything too fancy this time. He made up an assassin called the Last Spear, as he used to be a guard for a fallen royal household. The fall of the king as well as his relatives has forced the Last Spear into the life of a fugitive without status.

The man fell into a bad crowd, and eventually made it to an assassin's guild that taught him all the tricks of the trade. Ever since he completed his training, he began to wage a one-man reign of terror against his former enemies who took over his homeland.

The Last Spear stuck to the weapon of his choice. He wanted to let his targets recognize his spear as it plunged through their chests and their life faded away.

To him, it wasn't about the money. It was personal. He swore fealty to the fallen royals and dedicated his life to defend their honor even in death.

Others might think him crazy, but the Last Spear found his true calling in life once he started harvesting the lives of those who profited from the conquest. He made it his solemn mission to track down every bastard that contributed to the fall of the royals and stab his spear into hearts without fail.

"Well, this is intense." Ves shook his head.

His imagination got ahead of itself and conjured up a depressing image, one filled with both duty and pointless obsession. The Last Spear's futile crusade

against his enemies served no point except to torment his old enemies for a cause that no longer existed.

Well, the specifics of the backstory didn't matter too much in comparison to his character's skills and mindset. As long as he could capture some of that quintessential expertise in his image, his X-Factor became substantially more helpful.

This was especially important in this case as Ves wished to emphasize the rational side over the primal side of the X-Factor. A large emphasis on the latter in his previous designs should be the main reason why his designs gained a reputation for being recreational.

"Besides, assassin mechs are extremely difficult to pilot. My customers will need all the help they can get."

Most mech pilots hadn't received any special training on how to pilot an assassin mech. Some accommodation in this area should be very helpful with easing his model's substantial learning curve.

With the three elements of his Triple Division technique set in place, Ves employed the full force of his mind and superimposed them into a single gestalt. With this hazy half-marged product in his mind, he got into a trance and started his redesign project.

First, he scrapped the base frame, stripping away everything except for its barest support structures. When he was left with nothing but an alloy skeleton, he tweaked some of its bones in order to enhance its mobility.

Then, he started adding in the organs. All of the essential components such as the engine and the power reactor filled up the internals. Different from standard mechs, the DarkSilver line employed a large suite of active ECM and stealth systems that all took up a lot of space. All of these gadgets demanded a lot of space.

Ves crammed in as much as he could while building up his mech's internal architecture at the same. His experience with the Mark II turned him into a veteran in this kind of work, so deftly skirted past the knots that popped up every once in a while.

Every savings he made in space or weight, he allocated it towards enhancing his mech's mobility.

He paid relatively little attention to flexibility and agility and merely piled up on its ability to accelerate in a straight line. His assassin mech should be able to pounce upon its target with as little lead time as possible. Thus, acceleration mattered more than top speed.

"It still needs to be fairly fast in order to escape pursuit. It should at least run away far enough to re-engage its stealth."

While his design slowly came into fruition, the Triple Division technique started to fluctuate within his mind. Just like with the Tyrant he designed in his duel with Oleg, the three images started to chafe against each other once they started to show more signs of life.

Different from last time, his images didn't fundamentally conflict with each other. While Ves hadn't done so on purpose, all three elements possessed very few contradictions.

Instead, they jostled around for dominance. None of his images wanted to share responsibilities. All of them wished to dominate the gestalt and turn the others into its slaves.

The conflict became increasingly more heated as Ves did nothing to discourage the fighting. In fact, he'd been aiming something of the sort from the start. This time, he wished to see what happened when the fighting had stopped.

Chapter 212 Singular

Ever since his mind underwent some inexplicable changes, his influence on the X-Factor deepened. In particular, anything he imagined into existence took on a life on its own.

What did this mean?

It meant that his images took back their sovereignty! Their history, behavior, attitudes and aspirations developed on their own without conscious input from Ves. He might have created them in his mind, but their transformation into an insubstantial lifeform shielded them from any further alterations.

Rather than describe them as his creations, to be altered or discarded at will, they became thoughts given form, that could not be violated on a whim.

Naturally, Ves still remained the ultimate arbiter of their lives. As long as they took up space in the real estate of his mind, he could wipe them all away if he wished.

"Not that it's desirable to do so."

Ves created the images to enhance the quality of his mech. If he wiped them out before completing his design, he'd be neutering its X-Factor.

Like a parent who meticulously raised their kids, they had to let go of the reins when they grew up. Ves merely hoped he raised them well enough that they didn't do stupid things like doing drugs or spend all their time awake on games.

Currently, his three images shared the same amount of mental power provided by Ves. Thus, the initial struggles didn't amount to anything as all three images encountered the same level of opposition.

The stalemate quickly ended once his images expressed their personality traits. The assassin mech exhibited the least amount of activity, as it led a

fairly short and one-dimensional life. In contrast, the cheetah and the Last Spear both enjoyed complete lives!

With their inherent advantages, they employed their power in much more creative ways. They soon noticed the assassin mech's failure to keep up. Sensing weakness, the cheetah and the Last Spear tacitly stopped their probes against each other and turned their full might onto the poor mech.

The battle ended in an instant. Faced with attacks from two fronts, the assassin mech could barely put up a defense. The two voracious predators eagerly broke through its guard and frantically absorbed the substance that made up its existence.

The assassin mech died. The cheetah and the Last Spear cannibalized its very existence and used the energies to enrich their lives. They both underwent another minor transformation that strengthened their existences.

Once they fully digested their meals, the two surviving images eyed each other with barely restrained aggression. The cheetah exhibited unrelenting hunger towards flesh while the Last Spear stoically wished to put down the beast.

The Last Spear pounced first. As a former guardsman, he knew that he wouldn't be able to take his rival by surprise. So he decided to attack the cheetah openly, taking hold of the opportunity to deliver the first blow.

The cheetah reared back in surprise. The animal totem's strengthened existence suffered substantial damage from the opening strike. Enraged, the cheetah pounced on the Last Spear and started tearing apart his substance with its claws and teeth.

In the end, the primal ferocity of the cheetah was no match for the ingenuity of man. The animal only knew how to attack and paid little attention to defense.

The Last Spear endured the assault as best he could while he steadily whittled down the cheetah's existence.

Once he landed the final blow with his spear, the cheetah ceased to live. Its damaged and punctured existence became the tonic that fueled the Last Spear's final growth. The man steadily absorbed his final opponent's substance. His aura continued to grow stronger as he did so.

When nothing was left of the other two images, the Last Spear bent down on his knees and saluted to the memory of the fallen royal house. Ves could feel his earnest devotion to his cause and how it gave him strength. The added energies had transformed the surviving image into something that approached a living human being.

"It's too bad it still falls short."

Ves vaguely sensed that the Last Spear lacked a crucial ingredient that prevented his ascension into a higher state of being. The melancholy that emanated from the image bled over to Ves, and even he started to feel depressed.

He shook his head. "I can't lose sight of my goal."

If he started sympathising with his images, he'd become their servants instead of the other way around. Ves had to remind himself that as much as he aspired to explore every facet of the X-Factor, it had to fulfill its original purpose of strengthening his mech designs.

"I'm a runaway scientist who wants to subvert the heavens. It's stupid to treat them like actual humans."

It sounded a little callous, but it was an important distinction to make.

Now that the battle in his mind came to a conclusion, Ves resumed designing his mech. The changes in his mind immediately led to adjustments in his style.

While he still maintained his original vision, his perspective shifted to a direction that highly favored his sole surviving image. The Last Spear exerted a very strong influence in his decision making, to the point where Ves even backtracked on some of his earlier decisions.

Overall, his assassin mech became even stronger with the spear. His design gained some added flexibility in its arms, allowing it to wield its spear more effectively besides thrusting it forward.

Ves didn't necessarily agree with this direction as he had to sacrifice some redundancy in the arms to make room for the modifications.

"A skillful mech pilot will be able to outduel an opponent, but a lesser skilled pilot will suffer."

With much less room for error, it heightened the difficulty of piloting his design. The mech pilot had to avoid damage to its arms at all costs. Despite its added capability, his core design still retained its focus on assassination.

The Last Spear's domineering influence permeated his entire design. The two became connected in a way that made it impossible for Ves to separate the two. He could only destroy them both if he stopped in his tracks, because his sole surviving image could only be contained within his mind for a couple of months.

That had been an unwelcome surprise. While Ves never mothballed his projects so far, to learn that his images only had a limited lifespan ruined his mood somewhat.

Once his images reached a higher state, his mindspace became more unwelcoming to their presence. He had to finish his design as fast as possible so that he could anchor their existences to a more accommodating space.

Fortunately, Ves didn't intend to spend too much time on his assassin mech. As the Barracuda swiftly reached the Bright Republic and almost reached his home, Ves put the finishing touches on his largely-completed design.

Besides the redesign, Ves encountered very few hurdles on his way. His ample knowledge and the simple requirements for his design allowed him to focus solely on a couple of priorities, which led to very few conflicts.

Ves borrowed a few influences from his other designs for his assassin mech. Most significantly, Ves incorporated the Festive Cloud Generator within the small amount of space available. Once the mech sprung its ambush and charged forward with its spear, the entire mech should emit a massive amount of raging black smoke.

If its target became lucky enough to spot the phenomenon, the pilot should feel a lot of dread at the incoming wave of doom. Its effect became even more pronounced than the one he added to the Young Blood's legs.

His knight mech simply left a sharp trail behind its legs when it charged, while his assassin mech pumped out a lot more vapor. Ves wanted to amp up the illusion that nothing could stop his mech once it charged out into the open.

While all of the vapor didn't help the mech in its escape, it should still have a measurable psychological effect to bystanders.

If things went right, the black train of doom should become his assassin mech's calling card. Anyone who spotted it should instantly associate it to his design.

Ves spent some time on personalising its appearance. The stealth armor his variant adopted from the FFL-25 took on a default black coating that minimized reflections. While anything he added over the coating minutely affected its ability to stay hidden, its active stealth systems should be good enough to minimize the problem.

"I think you'll like this." He said to his image as he added the emblem of the fallen royal house onto the chest of his design. The circular symbol resembled a curled up yellow otter.

The Last Spear pulsed with strong emotion once Ves finished adding the emblem. Naturally, he also added in the symbol for his company at the much less prominent place on one of his assassin mech's arms.

The little touches of color added some levity to its serious appearance. Still, Ves didn't wish to detract too much from its original purpose.

"All it needs is a name."

Ves already started thinking of a suitable name at the tail end of his design phase. He wanted to leave a name on his design that encapsulated its role without being too garish or incomprehensible.

"What about the DarkSpear?"

It certainly encapsulated the nature of his assassin mech in the most succinct way possible. Those who first encounter the name should immediately be able to associate it with his variant due to the unusual pairing of a stealth mech with a spear weapon.

With that done, Ves submitted his latest design to the System after activating his Privacy Shield. Even in the confines of his own ship, he remained ambivalent about its security.

[Design Evaluation: DarkSpear]

Variant name: FFL-25P DarkSpear

Base model: DarkSilver FFL-25

Original Manufacturer: Carrera Designs

Weight Classification: Medium

Recommended Role: Assassin Mech

Armor: F+

Carrying Capacity: E-

Aesthetics: B+

Endurance: D

Energy Efficiency: E

Flexibility: C-

Firepower: B-

Integrity: C

Mobility: C+

Spotting: D

Stealth: A-

X-Factor: C++

Deviance: 76%

Performance improvement: 18%

Cost efficiency: -3%

Overall evaluation: The DarkSpear is a radical departure from the DarkSilver FFL-25 in many ways. While it largely retained the original's stealth systems, the DarkSpear is able to assassinate its targets as long as it remains unopposed during its brief but violent approach.

[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.]

The System really didn't give his design any high marks. Over the year since he owned the System, Ves learned that the program evaluated his designs in comparison to the same type of mechs.

While he wouldn't have to compare his works directly with the best designs in the galaxy, it still disappointed him a bit that his DarkSpear variant scored so low in many areas.

Different from his other evaluations, the System added a category for stealth. Only in this area did Ves achieve some results. While he hadn't introduced any innovations in this area, his redesign successfully preserved the strengths of the FFL-25's strong stealth systems. In the few areas that mattered, the DarkSpear at least met the minimum standard to fulfill its role.

The only thing that puzzled him was that the System rated him C++ for the X-Factor. Ves had never seen the System use a double plus as a modifier for his score.

"System, why did you give me a C++ and not a B- or something like that?"

This time, the System got off its lazy butt and answered his question in earnest.

[The X-Factor of your design has improved only marginally. The difference in quality exceed your previous efforts but it fails to meet the necessary standards to obtain a higher rating.]

Ves figured something like that must have happened, but it still disappointed him that his experiments hadn't led to a major breakthrough.

"Obviously, something must be different. I'll have to wait for customer feedback in order to find out if anything has improved."

Ves introduced his latest variant to his virtual catalog with hardly any notice. At first, none of his fans noticed the addition of a new 4-star mech.

That changed soon after when the first qualified Iron Spirit players tried out the DarkSpear. Word soon spread among the local players who reached the Gold League or higher.

A new phenomenon soon emerged in the local virtual mech scene.

Chapter 213 Printer

By the time the Barracuda finally landed at Cloudy Curtain's spaceport, he just released the DarkSpear. The storm this model unleashed in the local virtual community still required some time to come into fruition.

At this time, Ves mostly concerned himself with logistics. The new equipment he ordered from Leemar had been loaded in a jumbo transport ship that still took a few more weeks to arrive in Bentheim. The shipment had been delayed due to the need to adhere to the schedule of fixed convoy routes.

Naturally, the shipping services passed on the costs to their customers.

"Business keeps getting more inconvenient." Ves shook his head.

The Rimward Star Herald and all the other news portals had been hammering their subscribers with dire predictions about the state of the economy. The first major businesses that had been hanging on for years had already been tipped over into bankruptcy procedures due to the ongoing rise in costs.

Fortunately, his Living Mech Corporation only operated for about a year. It hadn't developed long enough to develop the massive overhead that older companies usually ended up with. He paid more for security than any other non-production expenses such as payroll, taxes and interest payments.

Ves hoped to change that over time when he finally expanded his workshop's production capacity. While he still had to wait for his alloy compressor and

CTM, with the hacked processors in his possession he could finally put the finishing touches on the reconstructed Dortmund printer.

He already looked forward to working with an industrial printer. Ves already had a taste of it when he worked with the stellar machines in Master Olson's Apprentice Workshop. If the Dortmund printer worked as advertised, then Ves could expect to speed up his fabrication phase by as much as seventy-five percent!

In particular, the Dortmund massively sped up the fabrication of uncompressed armor plating. Its increased speed and precision allowed Ves and any other fabricator like Carlos to automate the fabrication of any component up to a certain level of complexity without any worry.

The Dortmund could even fabricate more advanced processors that his current printer couldn't handle. Actually, the mini printer collecting dust in the Barracuda's workshop possessed even more capabilities in this regard, though it needed a lot of time to fabricate a single chip.

Once Ves disembarked from his corvette with Melkor and Lucky, a small fleet of shuttles from Sanyal-Ablin awaited his presence.

"Sir, please enter the center shuttle."

They boarded the only shuttle with the hatch left open. Once they secured themselves into the seats, the entire arrangement started to move. Even a casual trip from Orinoco to Freslin required an armed escort these days. Ves lamented the necessity of it all and the extra charges he'd receive from Sanyal-Ablin.

"The mercenaries and the security companies must be making a killing these days."

"It's not without reason." Melkor commented. "The security industry is able to deter most threats by brandishing their superior gear. Even then, the

occasional clashes result in a lot of wear and tear. It takes a massive amount of money to keep their assets functional."

The smaller mercenary corps had a particularly rough time trying to keep afloat. A single ruinous battle could result in massive repair bills that ruined their financial outlook.

"Did you enjoy your stay at Abelard?" Ves asked, changing the topic. "I can imagine the standard for mech pilots is a lot higher in Coalition space."

"It's actually not too far apart. Abelard employs a lot more simulations as well as real mechs so they can insure that every graduate will at least reach the level of advanced pilot. However, even then they can't insure that any of them will advance into expert pilots."

Normal mech pilots made up the rank-and-file that usually ended up piloting frontline mechs. Advanced pilots received better treatment due to their ability to bring out the full strength of standard humanoid or animal mechs.

Yet even then, a state wouldn't shed a tear if they lost them by the thousands in a single battle. As long as a state had sufficient time, they could replenish such pilots with relative ease.

Only when a pilot advanced to the rank of expert pilot did they truly become elite. Even the extended Larkinson Family only boasted of a couple of expert pilots, almost all of whom retired due to old age or injury.

His grandfather Benjamin happened to be one of them, and used the respect afforded to him to transition into a career in the Ministry of Defense. Even Rittersberg's career politicians had to sit up and pay attention to a former expert pilot.

"How far are you from reaching this rank?"

Melkor chuckled at his question. "You have no idea how difficult it is to achieve a breakthrough. What I've learned at Abelard has made it even clearer to me how much of a gap I still have to close."

"So even second-rate states have difficulty training expert pilots."

"They have more options. Their standard training doesn't produce much better results, but as long as they're willing to allocate unlimited resources to training a couple of important scions, they'll be able to reach the necessary standard by force. Even then, there are several shortcomings, as they often have shaky foundations. The bad habits they haven't corrected will become critical weaknesses at that point."

Ves didn't fully understand what it meant to be an expert pilot, much as Melkor didn't understand the ranks of mech designers. If Ves ever wanted to move up to designing elite mechs, he had to learn what made expert pilots so rare and valuable. Fortunately, Ves had plenty of time before he reached that point.

First, he had to take care of his more immediate concerns. Once his guarded shuttle arrived at the landing pad inside his workshop's premises, he hopped out with a spring and entered his familiar abode. Carlos already waited for him at the entrance.

"Good to see you here!"

"I'm back now. How's the workshop while I was gone?"

"Nothing really comes to mind. I've already told you everything you needed to know from the reports. The main thing that's really bad for business is that the costs of raw materials is continuing to rise. Right now, the total cost of production has ballooned to 20 million credits."

Ves became alarmed. "That much!? A few weeks ago you said it was still around 19 million credits!"

The increase amounted to five percent, which didn't sound so scary. However, his cost figure already ballooned by almost twenty percent since the start of his production and it might even reach fifty percent by the end of the year.

When Ves delved in the reports, he found out that the major resource suppliers prioritized their bigger clients over small fish like him. With the LMC's current sales volume of roughly a hundred mechs a year, it didn't even represent a blink in the profits of the major suppliers.

The increasingly depressing cost picture reminded Ves once again that he had to take control over his own supply chain. At the very least, he had to ensure the continued supply of the rarer exotics in the event the major suppliers pulled out of the MTA's internal market entirely.

"Let's hear some good news for a change. How are your silver label Mark II's coming along?"

Carlos smiled at him. "I've completely mastered their fabrication. I've poured into all of the manuals and studied more about assembly in my free time. At this moment, I can ensure only one part in a million will have flaws."

Even in the best conditions, a fabricator never promised a success rate of a hundred percent. The Mark II especially exhibited a higher level of complexity than normal. That Carlos made it this far could only be attributed to the fact that he had plenty of time to master one single model.

In comparison, while Ves didn't possess the same level of confidence, his deeper foundation allowed him to fabricate many other models with very few flaws.

As for Carlos, his shallow range of skills forced him to start from nothing whenever he encountered a different model.

"Don't forget to keep mastering your assembly skills. You're already getting a lot of hands-on experience, but without the theoretical background you won't be as flexible as me whenever I introduce a new model."

"When are you ready to introduce your new design? It's already getting stale fabricating the same Mark II over and over again."

"It will take a few months at the very least. First I have to install all my new toys. Then I have to round out my collection of component licenses. I'll likely end up short on money so I might have to pursue some money making projects in the meantime."

Now that Ves established the Living Mech Corporation and had proven its capability to run at a profit, however tenable that might be, his reputation should open up more opportunities.

Once they reached the fabrication hall, they approached the long-dormant Dortmund 3D printer. From a mess of loose components scavenged off a score of wrecked machines, Ves meticulously restored or reconstructed them into a mechanically functional machine. Only the security restrictions hidden within the programming of its processors held it back.

Now, even that ceased to be an obstacle.

Ves carefully installed the processors back in the appropriate slots before closing up the printer. The anticipation practically swelled within his heart as he pressed the button that should turn his machine online.

A couple of lights dramatically glowed. The dubiously restored Dortmund accepted the input from the processors and became activate without any hiccups.

"It works!"

Both Ves and Carlos celebrated at the Dortmund's successful restoration. Ves eagerly approached the onboard terminal and dug into its diagnostics and status readings. His preoccupation with the machine kept going for hours as he patiently tested the Dortmund's capability to print both micro and larger components.

He even fed the printer some cheap alloys from his inventory in order to see with his own two eyes if the Dortmund matched its description.

"That's so fast!" Carlos exclaimed when a perfect piece of uncompressed armor plating emerged from the machine. "You've got to let me use this machine!"

"You'll get your chance." Ves chuckled. Even he began to tire of his old and ramshackle printer. "For now, whenever I have no need of it, you can use the Dortmund."

Before Carlos could use the new machine, Ves set conditions for its use. Its higher speed and powerful capabilities also increased the risk of catastrophic damage in the event the Dortmund malfunctioned. Carlos had to study the manual and practice fabricating with the Dortmund in a virtual simulation before he received permission to use the industrial printer.

While Carlos went off to do his homework, Ves took over his fabricator's production quota for the week. He already had a silver label Mark II lined up to be shipped at the end of the week. Ves pulled up his sleeves and went to work.

The fabrication run only took up less than a day. Even Carlos required three days at his very best. Parts kept spitting out the exit tray like a machine gun, to the point where his workshop's loader bots threatened to bottleneck the fast-paced fabrication process.

The overworked bots simply couldn't keep up. They worked their antigrav modules to the bone trying to supply enough raw materials for the hungry printer and pick up finished components when they piled up at the exit tray.

In the end, it took longer to assemble the Mark II than it took to fabricate all of its parts. Ves completed the entire fabrication and assembly cycle of the Mark II within two days. With practice, Carlos should be able to achieve the same within three days even if he turned his brain off, as the Dortmund's formidable automation processes did most of the heavy lifting.

With this new machine, the LMC finally had the grounds to call itself a mech manufacturer. Ves smiled with satisfaction as he patted the Dortmund's exterior.

"The first step is done."

Ves still had a lot of hurdles to go through before he became ready to design an original mech. Despite the long road ahead, Ves already thought of a couple of ways to make his printer more useful.

"There shouldn't be more than half-a-dozen industrial printers on Cloudy Curtain, if there are any at all. Perhaps I can make use of this fact."

Chapter 214: Shady

After some rudimentary research, Ves found out that Cloudy Curtain pretty all of its gear from Bentheim. The short distance enabled local businesses to order all manner of machine equipment from the local mecca of fabrication.

So the LMC couldn't effectively rent out its fabrication capacity to other businesses.

However, his options didn't end there. Besides a smattering of small and medium enterprises, Cloudy Curtain also hosted Walter's Whalers. The mech gang recently underwent a major expansion after selling off their scavenged goods. The bulk exotics they sold might not be very valuable, but the huge amount they sold in the black and grey markets earned them lots of credits.

As Ves had traveled more throughout the galaxy and became wiser to the ways of human society, he realized that the Whalers possessed a lot of

connections. The strength of their gang lay not only in their solidarity, but also their expansive network with many elements of the Bright Republic's underbelly.

As his company required a lot of money to round out its component licenses, Ves called a meeting with Dietrich. They met up in downtown Freslin at a coffee shop owned by the Whalers. Ves carefully activated his Privacy Shield before they began their discussion, preventing his guards from listening in on sensitive matters.

"You sure that gadget works as advertised?" Dietrich pointed at his comm.

"It's never been beaten as far as I know."

Perhaps some devices could crack through the shield, but Ves doubted that Sanyal-Ablin brought any such equipment with them to snoop on Ves. Kings, presidents and CEOs of major companies deserved that kind of attention.

Ves sipped on a cup of coffee that Dietrich ordered for him. "We haven't seen each other in a while. Before we get to business, how's it going with the Whalers?"

"Oh, it's great! Our numbers are growing by the day!" Dietrich boasted with a gleaming smile. "You helped a lot as well. You've energised a lot of the bored potentates at home. More people are getting interested mechs again and they've been knocking at our doors until they collapsed!"

Ves hoped he had that kind of effect. Too many potentates in Cloudy Curtain left their training to the wayside once they failed to enter an advanced academy on Bentheim.

"What about their training?"

"Oh we're picking the cream of the crop, whatever little there is, but you know how it goes. The recruits have more spunk than skill, and it takes a lot of screaming and yelling to get them to learn something right."

"Sounds awful."

"It's a little better than before. They've been practising a lot in games, particularly with your knight and rifleman mechs. Still, that's no true substitute to piloting real mechs."

The local mech academies on Cloudy Curtain had been underfunded for decades. Their training mechs resembled zombies and their curriculum fit a history class more than a mech class. Many of its graduates didn't even qualify for the lowest rank of mech pilot.

As for the local elites, they relied more on private tutors than trust the academy's teachers to do an adequate job. Ves always thought that Cloudy Curtain hosted enough private tutors and retired veterans to found a private academy on their own, but to each his own.

"Do you have the mechs ready for your recruits?"

"Heavens, no! They'll crash and burn within minutes if we let them anywhere near the cockpit. Besides, we don't have the money."

"I can help you with that problem." Ves said with a smile. "I happen to get my hands on an industrial printer that can fabricate pretty much anything you think of. Best of all, its processors are hacked, so it won't be sending any logs to the original manufacturer."

Most 3D printers established a connection to the local networks in order to send their logs and activity reports to various parties, chief among them the MTA.

Dietrich looked at Ves with a dubious eye. "Are you thinking about doing the repair scam?"

The repair scam was a basic but widespread method that happened to be popular among mercenaries and gangs. When they bought a mech, they usually signed a standard contract that enumerated several rights and restrictions, chief among them the right to repair and replace a damaged component.

Imagine if a mercenary corps reported that their mech lost its arms after a battle against pirates. While they could order replacement arms from the original manufacturer, if they owned a capable 3D printer, they might as well reproduce the arms themselves, so they do so.

A few months later, the same mech happened to lose its legs in a training accident. Again, instead of contacting the original manufacturer, they fabricate replacement legs on their own and restore their mech to full health.

Perhaps another month later, the mercenary corps suffered an ambush from a criminal gang. The recently repaired mech happened to lose its entire torso and head. However, they happened to recover a pair of arms and legs, and they looked to be in pristine condition as well!

The mercenary commander decided not to bother the manufacturer and painstakingly fabricated an entire torso and head, and fit the orphan arms and legs to the machine. Voila, the mech regained its top form!

Of course, all of those battles and training accidents never really happened. They only existed on paper when the mercenary corps had to come up with an excuse to justify their supposed battle damage.

In reality, they bent the repair clauses to their advantage and reproduced an entirely mech out 'replacement parts'. This sort of behavior was really prevalent in the frontier, where expeditions often disappeared into the wilderness for months or years.

Dietrich definitely looked interested. "How good is your new printer?"

"It's a top-of-the-line machine in the Republic. Better machines exist, but what they can do, my Dortmund can do as well."

Ves sent him a document of the Dortmund's capabilities via his comm. While his Privacy Shield blocked any signals from going in and out of the tiny radius around him, it didn't stop any signals kept inside the bubble.

"I don't really know how to read this." Dietrich said and scratched his head. "I'll have to take this up with our technicians, but I believe you."

They elaborated their deal and discussed the details. In addition to commissioning their own 'replacement parts', the Whalers also promised to extend the same service to their contacts for a small fee. Ves and Dietrich didn't set up a formal contract for this agreement. Instead, they arranged everything verbally.

Regarding his earnings, Ves estimated that he stood to gain an extra hundred million credits a year from this agreement. The Whalers and any other clients took care of the resources and all the other costs. Ves merely had to keep his printer available for a couple of hours a week.

"It's best not to go overboard." Dietrich warned him. "Too many new mechs without an obvious source will obviously ring some alarms."

Ves agreed with him. He reserved most of his printer's capacity for his own business activities, especially when his sales started picking up. For now, Ves had the capacity to spare, but once he published a competitive design, he planned to phase out this arrangement.

"Can you offer me some money up-front?" He asked. "I'm kind of short on money."

"Are you in debt?"

"Not exactly."

The mech pilot's face scrunched up as Ves explained his circumstances. "Damn, I always heard it took a fortune to start making mechs, but these sums are outrageous! I'm sorry to say I can't help you here."

This left Ves with a dilemma. While his new agreement with Dietrich could potentially net him a lot of earnings, it took too long to earn all that money.

With this business done, they moved on to other matters. Ves recalled that he once asked Dietrich a favor. He asked them to investigate the Colmes region that the two big farming consortiums secretly developed.

"Have you found out what they are up to?"

Dietrich shook his head. "It's impossible to observe from afar. Our planet's cloud cover rules out any attempts to observe from space, while anything that is hanging lower in the air will get detected for sure."

"So why are the farming consortiums in such of a tizzy at this time?"

"Just because we can't look at it, doesn't mean we can't stir the pot." Dietrich smirked and crossed his arms. "Do you know how easy it is to redirect some asteroids to fall upon that area?"

That sounded really dangerous. Redirecting asteroids to employ them as makeshift bombs touched upon a fundamental taboo.

"Oh, relax. They're only about the size of a container. Nothing that will wipe out an entire continent."

"And nothing has stopped the asteroids from falling?"

"Hah! Do you know we're in charge of asteroid defense? It's super easy to tell the government they got totally smashed when I brought them a lot of drinks."

As an obscure, rural planet, Cloudy Curtain boasted little in the way of orbital infrastructure. Their home planet had no space station or defense station, let alone a Republican patrol carrier. No other local power boasted as much mechs as the Whalers.

Sending the asteroid down to the Colmes region was a brazen attack on the farming consortiums. They should know that the Whalers were complicit in this attack, and if they had some brains they should also know that the attack had a connection with Ves.

However, without any evidence, the farming consortiums had no recourse. Making a fuss risked escalating their conflict. In addition, their secretive activities might get exposed.

From the way the consortiums and the ruling coalitions kept mum all these months, Ves suspected that he touched on a critical activity.

"What are they hiding, you think?"

"Even we're scratching our heads at the question." Dietrich responded. "Our best guess is that they're cultivating some super sensitive crops. It's probably something that requires unique conditions to grow and it should also be of very high value. Maybe the farming consortiums have been smuggling those goodies in between the bags of regular cloud rice whenever they send another shipment to Bentheim."

Hardly any inspection paid close attention to bulk goods like rice. If the Whalers guessed correctly, the farming consortiums might be cultivating an extremely high-value crop that Bentheim's upper society loved.

The question was whether they wanted to do something about it. "Do you think it's illegal?"

"It has to be. They shouldn't be so secretive about it otherwise."

The problem they faced was that both sides held a certain amount of leverage over the other. Ves could threaten to sic the Whalers onto the Colmes region while the ruling coalition could ram their tax bill through the planetary assembly. Both measures resulted in drastic consequences that neither side wanted to see.

Ves predicted that the status quo wouldn't last forever. On principle, the White Doves completely hated mechs and everything they stood for. A mech manufacturer on their own soil offended them in a fundamental way. In essence, they were mortal enemies to each other.

And now, Ves brought over the Whalers to his side. They never really paid attention to the local power structure before, but the latest incident should have woken them up.

"Sorry about bringing you into this fight." Ves apologised.

"No worries, man. They're idiots, anyway. In this kind of galaxy, who the hell believes in pacifism?"

"Pacifists or not, they're loaded with money. They might send some trouble on your way."

The easiest way to cope with Walter's Whalers was to hire a rival gang to dispute their territory. As long as the farming consortiums threw enough money, they were bound to find some willing participants.

Despite expectations, Dietrich remained complacent. "They can try all they want. No sane outfit will take them up on their offer. Do you want to know why?"

"Why?"

Dietrich leaned forward and whispered in a low tone. "I'll let you in on a secret. We answer to Monty the Beheader."

"Monty?!" Ves exclaimed. "One of the Three Tyrants of Bentheim?"

"Yup!"

The vast criminal underworld made a lot of men and women stand out for their brutality. One of the ultimate rulers of the Bentheim underworld, Monty the Beheader became known for cutting off the heads of more than a thousand clansmen who betrayed his allegiance. He boldly recorded the dirty deed and let it spread on the galactic net.

Ever since then, everyone knew that you should never mess around with Monty the Beheader.

Learning that the Whalers ultimately answered to the notorious Bentheim crime boss made Ves feel a little queasy. The kind of activities that Monty engaged in frequently made the news, and not in a good way.

Chapter 215 Runaway Success

"Why did you tell me this?" Ves asked with an elevated heartbeat. The Three Tyrants should never be brought up in a casual conversation. In addition, Ves shouldn't even know of the connection between the Monty the Beheader and Walter's Whalers.

"So you know who's got our backs. He's not the nicest boss, but he's fair to his underlings. Besides, the Whalers are merely associates to him. He doesn't pay too much attention to what goes on in hick planets like ours."

"That's good to hear."

It certainly explained how the Whalers enjoyed so many connections. They were actually a part of a larger underground organisation with tentacles that stretched out everywhere. In the larger scheme of things, the Whalers kept an

eye on Monty's backyard and occasionally helped hide some hot goods that needed to be squared away somewhere obscure but not out of reach.

Dietrich swept up his palm. "Besides, he's really big in the resource trade. I heard you've been looking around for a fixed supplier. If you want, I can give you an introduction to some companies that are in his pocket."

The offer sounded very attractive, to the point where Ves almost spilled his coffee. Still, he felt reluctant to establish deeper ties with a notorious crime boss. Doing a couple of odd jobs might be okay, but if he started getting in deep, he'd wonder if he could ever get out someday.

"Thank you, but I can take care of my own business."

They made no other agreements at this time. Ves hadn't gotten the instant cash infusion that he hoped for, but at least he secured another revenue stream, even if it looked a little dubious. Carlos would have to deal with the extra workload.

After they left the coffee shop, they went their separate ways. Ves returned to his workshop while contemplating his business relationships.

He always knew he had to keep an amicable relationship with the local gang. At Rittersberg, he'd been taught about the reality of the criminal underworld and how pervasive their influence extended throughout society.

Especially out in the galactic rim, most third-rate states lacked the strength to control their territory effectively. This gave room for alternative power structures with different goals in mind. Bentheim was especially rife with warring crime groups, which was one reason why Ves avoided the place.

"Luckily, there's nothing going on here that will attract any serious attention." Ves concluded. "If there's one thing the politicians are right about, it's that our planet is too poor to rob."

Ves still thought differently, but he became more aware of the risks. If Cloudy Curtain ever shed its status as an underdeveloped planet, some groups might wish to take a piece of the pie. If too many people all grabbed a pie, Ves would have nothing left but an empty plate.

"I doubt the situation will end up that way. With the Whalers having been in power for more than decade, they're not so easy to dislodge."

When his armored shuttle arrived back at his workshop, Ves briefed Carlos in on his extra assignment. His friend looked very dubious at him, as if he couldn't believe Ves dared to engage in such a scheme.

"You do know your cousin is part of the Planetary Guard, right? Won't she lock you up if she finds out what kind of scam you're pulling off?"

"She'll never know." Ves confidently said. "The Whalers will take care of all the paperwork. They'll establish shell companies and everything that will fake legitimate repair orders. Even if someone digs into their background, they'll only find that they're owned by another shell company which is owned by another shell company and so on."

Most companies only existed on paper. They acted as holding companies that allowed the real shareholders to hang on to properties without leaving behind their names. This could get very complicated but also very lucrative once different companies set their headquarters at different tax jurisdictions.

"What about your grandfather?" Carlos continued to press. "He's a board member of your company, you know. There's no way you can hide the truth from him once he sees how much extra activities we're doing."

"My grandfather won't make a fuss. I'm sure of it. What I'm doing will not only benefit the company financially, but I'll also be appeasing the local gang that's in control of the planet."

Sometimes you had to get your hands dirty in order to do business. Ves was pretty sure that the Larkinson family established their own ties with shady groups in order to safeguard their real estate on Rittersberg.

In any case, he'd deal with it if it became a problem. At this early stage, Ves couldn't turn his eyes away to an additional revenue stream.

Since the equipment he ordered from Leemar still took some time to arrive, Ves decided to check up on his virtual sales. He placed the DarkSpear onto the virtual market a week ago and wanted to see whether he achieved enough sales.

His eyes opened wide when he inspected his sales history. "Over two-thousand sales!"

He only predicted an initial sales volume of around a hundred mechs. Even in his most optimistic projections, he never dared to hope that he could break past five-hundred units sold.

The amount of credits he earned from these sales still remained negligible as Ves continued to set the lowest minimum prices on his designs. What Ves truly cared about was how much DP the System awarded him for achieving so much 4-star sales.

Since Ves earned 10 DP for each DarkSpear sold, the System should have added over 20,000 DP to his account! He quickly summoned up his Status on his comm and saw with his own eyes that he earned just a little bit more than that amount.

Sure, a four-digit sales volume hardly phased the more successful developers of virtual mechs, but to Ves it represented a great success.

Once he got over his shock, he started scratching his head. Why did his latest model sell so well? Cloudy Curtain might have a modest amount of Gold Leaguers, but Ves imagined that not a lot people would be interested in

piloting an assassin mech. It required a very patient and deliberate playstyle that contrasted sharply with the instant direct action that other mech classifications provided.

He looked at his customer profiles and found that the majority actually came from Bentheim instead of Cloudy Curtain. For some reason, his latest virtual design caught on there.

After a bit of digging, Ves found out why.

In short, a couple of early adopters fell in love with the concept. One of the biggest complaints of assassin mechs was that it became extremely tedious trying to sneak up on an enemy mech.

The DarkSpear happened to skip the riskiest portion of the approach. Unlike other assassin mechs, it didn't need to enter the range in which the sensors of any mech became increasingly more effective at spotting anomalies.

What happened was that the early adopters basically cheesed through the Gold League by taking out their opposition with sudden charges from behind. The enemies never saw them coming if the pilots of the DarkSpear models used them effectively.

Ves guessed that the X-Factor played a vital role in easing the pilots to the stalk-and-pounce tactic the DarkSpear heavily favored. Even through the complications of piloting a virtual mech, the X-Factor still made its presence known, especially since it possessed the highest grade that Ves had produced so far.

The DarkSpear caused a minor upheaval in the Bentheim virtual gaming community. With several copies making the rounds, many oblivious gamers throughout the galaxy turned into their victims. They all left rude and profanity-filled comments behind on the DarkSpear's store page.

"Awful specs! Even my dog can design a better mech than this dude!"

"STUPID MECH! DON'T BUY THIS PIECE OF GARBAGE!"

"I've never heard of Komodo before, but if the mech designers there come up with designs like this, then we're better off without them!"

Still, despite the intense reaction to his new design, he still sold a couple of hundred virtual mechs to players around the galaxy, mostly from the other rim sectors.

Those who lived closer to the center of the galaxy generally scoffed at any mechs designed from someone from the galactic rim. They also enjoyed a higher standard of living so they could afford much higher quality mechs.

Still, despite the spontaneous success of his mech, Ves didn't think it was sufficient. Every 4-star mech charged a considerable sum of in-game gold or real credits to purchase. Once players reached the Gold League, they had to be more mindful of their spending as Iron Spirit introduced more elements to their in-game economy.

So Ves set aside the store page and performed a casual search on the galactic net. The first article that showed up pretty much revealed the

MOSVILLE FIREFLIES CAPTAIN JARLE BRENTHILL DOMINATING HIS OPPONENTS IN THE VIRTUAL BATTLEFIELD WITH A QUIRKY NEW ASSASSIN MECH!

Even Ves had heard about the Mosville Fireflies, though only in passing. Their team captain happened to have come across the DarkSpear somehow when he publically streamed his gaming session.

With his superior skills sharpened by many years on the duelling circuit, Jarle quickly mastered the essence of the DarkSpear and began to take it into the Arena.

Even at the Diamond League level, he completely ran over his opponents. He always made effective use of terrain to further mask the DarkSpear's invisible approach. Jarle never got caught before he started his charge. Even when his mech dropped its stealth, his opponents still took a second or so to react to its sudden presence.

By that time, the DarkSpear's weapon ran through the backs of their mechs.

Even though Jarle eventually matched up against increasingly skilled opponents who managed to react in time, his earlier winning streak had compelled his fans to try out the DarkSpear for themselves. As stream viewers already witnessed a great example on how to utilize the DarkSpear, they quickly found the best uses for this mech.

"Hm, this is the second time I can thank a streamer for delivering me so many sales." He realized.

This time, a pro showcased his model. If a casual player tried their hand at the DarkSpear, they probably would have fumbled in front of an audience. That could have given his design a bad reputation.

Ves looked around and found that Jarle had somehow become obsessed with the DarkSpear. When Ves visited his stream page, he saw that Jarle had been streaming for four hours straight today, attracting a respectable audience that numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

All of this budding enthusiasm for his mech gave him an idea. He called over Raella, who had almost recovered from her Molgon poisoning by now. His niece entered the office area with a grumbling face.

"What's up?"

"I need your help with something. What do you know about Jarle Brenthill?"

As a former amateur duellist, Raella knew more about the duelling scene than anyone else on the planet. She instantly perked up when she heard the name. "Jarle? He's a sick skirmisher pilot. In fact, he's one of my role models! He's great at psychological warfare and always manages to approach his opponents from a tricky angle. He's also wickedly handsome."

Raella said that with a teasing smile that Ves automatically ignored. Instead, he pressed his own concerns. "He's streaming one of my virtual mechs right now on the galactic net. Take a look."

When Raella peeked at the projection, she raised her eyebrows. "Wow. I didn't know you could design something as devious as this DarkSpear. If I was any good at spears, I'd probably be interested too."

"Do you think Jarle might be open to some form of sponsorship or other cooperation with me?"

Mentioning sponsorship to Raella who used to aspire for it might not be wise, but Ves figured enough time had passed to take the sting away.

"That depends." Raella crossed her arms. She stopped paying attention to the stream. "Jarle is the team captain of the Fireflies. Currently, they're doing great in the 3v3 arenas, so he's not short on sponsors and cash. It will take a lot of credits to attract his attention."

"How much?"

"Mech athletes make a lot of money when they win." Raella explained. "They have to if they want to repair all the battle damage their mechs frequently incur. It takes around ten million credits to get your foot in the door."

That sounded way too much money for Ves. He might as well use Iron Spirit's direct advertising system in that case.

Ves frowned a bit. "I'm not talking about a sponsorship of the Fireflies. I just want to sponsor his stream for a time. Will it be possible to come to an arrangement with him in this matter?"

"Well, it's off-season right now, so Jarle has a lot of free time on his hands. You have to know that a pro at his level isn't streaming because he's in need of extra cash. He's using it to interact with his fans."

That made a lot of sense. When Ves watched the stream, Jarle frequently responded to the comments from his viewers. That sort of interactive engagement with his fans helped build his brand.

"So there's no chance I can catch his attention?"

"That's not true. There's still one way you can catch his attention." Raella replied with a smile. "Offer him something unique. Streamers love showing off unique mechs that are tailored to their style. Since Jarle seems to love your DarkSpear design so much, why not offer to customize it? A lot of mech designers show off their goods in this way, not only at online streams, but also in the real arenas."

Her suggestion had a lot of merit. Customized mechs remained the ultimate possession for many mech pilots.

Chapter 216 Jarle

[MissMisstep: Jarle, what do you think is better when it comes to mech duels, a win with severe battle damage or a loss without scratch?]

"A win! You've got to win all the way! If you're already starting to think about repair bills when you're duelling another team, you've already given up." Jarle emphatically said. "The only way to earn enough credits to keep your mechs in tip top shape is to keep on winning!"

In truth, even a top-tier team like the Velvet Fists couldn't afford to wreck their mechs in every match. Each duelling season tested the skill and judgement of

each team. Some knew when to give up early and saved up on repairs, while others kept on fighting past the point of no return and faced exponentially greater costs.

Explaining all of that took a lot of nuance that belied his public image as a daredevil. With his handsome face and his half-shaved blond hair, Jarle presented himself as the ultimate thrill seeker who constantly risked it all and won.

His bold but slightly dim person also helped mask his deviously tricky fighting style.

[ZevHarper: Will we be seeing you in action this summer?]

Jarle nodded inside his virtual cockpit. "I'll be appearing in a couple of rallies organised by the Mech Corps. Be sure to check the schedule in my profile page!"

Even as he responded to his many viewers, his DarkSpear silently crept through the rocky cliffs and hills of a desolate moonscape.

His mech's high powered stealth systems ran at quarter strength right now. It did nothing to prevent a mech from seeing his DarkSpear if it had a direct line of sight, but it was sufficient to dampen his other emissions as long as Jarle stayed behind cover.

Finding the right place to hide happened to be one of his specialties. Under his expert control, he slowly crept behind the highly advanced swordsman mech that kept a wary eye towards its surroundings.

In 1v1 duels like this, if your opponent never showed up, he probably prepared an ambush. As a fellow Diamond League player, the enemy pilot didn't let down his guard. An extremely complicated dance emerged as a result where both sides tried to maneuver in their most optimal positions.

The DarkSpear held a decisive advantage over the swordsman mech. The latter excelled in open duels, and did not include any sophisticated sensor arrays capable of detecting stealthed opponents.

However, even if the swordsman mech only possessed a standard set of sensors, their overall quality ensured they'd be able to detect any approaching assassin mechs once it reached a distance of fifty to a hundred meters or so. That gave the pilot enough reaction time to set up a guard.

As long as his swordsman mech withstood the first blow, his advantage only grew.

With soft and measured steps, the DarkSpear slowly closed the distance to the swordsman mech. Jarle moved practically in sync with his mech. He became completely immersed in the act to the point where he stopped paying attention to the questions of his viewers.

He was on the hunt.

The enemy pilot had a brain, as he chose the most open area on the battlefield. A wide stretch of moon plains provided precious few opportunities to conceal an approach.

Jarle estimated the DarkSpear's power and heat reserves and noted that he had less capacity in the latter. It didn't matter too much as his estimates placed his mech's capacity within range of his targeted distance.

He flicked the switch that activated the full-powered stealth suite. The DarkSpear shimmered out of existence, and a low oppressive dampening field minimized its other emissions.

Jarle entered a highly focused state where he constantly adjusted the movements of his mech according to his judgement. He moved when his opponent looked elsewhere and sat still when he risked getting noticed. Even

if the DarkSpear obscured its entire frame, it was very difficult to hide its footsteps.

He managed, somehow. He utilized a special stepping technique that allowed the DarkSpear to move forward briskly while leaving minimal traces behind. It utilized the slight uneven terrain to its advantage as no battlefield was truly flat.

The swordsman mech had no clue a deadly hunter approached its back. As the DarkSpear slowly stalked its way closer, Jarle's anticipation built up to a heightening crescendo. Target fixation threatened to overwhelm his mind but Jarle made sure to hold back his urge to propel his mech forward.

"Now is not the time."

His mech subsided a bit as it realized that Jarle had a point. The swordsman mech turned around abruptly a few seconds later. If the DarkSpear charged out at this point, it would have been exposed.

It became a test of time. Would the swordsman mech turn back around before the DarkSpear's cloak ran out? It might be better for the assassin mech to begin its attack, for if it became exposed at a distance, it would suffer a very bad fate.

In this, Jarle could only rely on his own seasoned instincts. Normally, he never really took simulations like Iron Spirit seriously. For all of its professed attempts at realism, it always seemed to pale in comparison to the visceral feeling of piloting a real mech.

Yet the DarkSpear changed his outlook on the game. He only purchased the gimmicky model on a whim as he was curious to see how someone could marry a spear wielder and an assassin mech. Ever since he entered the cockpit, Jarle had the sensation that he entered into a black hole. The mech hid a lot of depth, and he'd plunged straight into the hole.

By now, he must have piloted the DarkSpear through hundreds of duels. All of his viewers got to see his overwhelming performance in the comfort of their homes. Even now, his fans screamed for him to wreck this swordsman mech and add another victory to his already swelling record.

"Not yet."

As Jarle's mech only had around five seconds left of cloaking time, the swordsman mech finally turned around. The moment it did so, the DarkSpear erupted from its hiding spot and charged forth in a blazing black missile of doom. The Festive Cloud Generator attached to its frame billowed out demonically towards the unsuspecting swordsman mech.

The enemy pilot's mech blared an alarm. To his credit, he turned around fairly quickly, though the only thing he saw was a big black streak of vapor closing in on his mech. The pilot panicked and prepared to dodge, only to stop when he belatedly noticed that his sensors detected a mech at the forefront of the cloud. The swordsman mech quickly raised its sword in a guard.

"Too late!" Jarle yelled as his mech deftly veered to the left at the very last moment. Propelled by the full momentum of a mech at the apex of its charge, his spear punched right through the swordsman mech's chest and dealt moderate damage to its internals, barely missing the core shell of the power reactor!

The stricken mech received such a heavy blow that it had been flung into a half-spinning back throw. Even then, it recovered remarkably quickly. It continued to spin and kicked out with its feet, preventing the DarkSpear from delivering its coup-de-grace.

"You're bleeding." Jarle grinned. "I can feel your power reactor failing."

The swordsman mech exhibited unstable movements as its entire frame suffered from a lack of power. Still, even at half its strength, the swordsman

mech possessed superior strength and speed. Besides its awful chest wound, all of its other sections remained undamaged.

As if realizing its predicament, the swordsman mech threw caution to the wind and embarked on a furious counter-attack with all of its systems running past their peak. Its pilot needed to ensure a quick win, and he was confident that his damaged mech could handle an assassin mech out in the open.

Jarle grinned as he guessed his opponent's intentions. "You've already died after I made my first blow."

His viewers howled for blood and started betting on how much time it took for Jarle to finish it off. The shortest bet ranged from ten seconds while the longest one went up to three minutes.

Perhaps an average pilot might be in trouble, but Jarle had more than a decade of duelling experience. While he missed his daggers, the DarkSpear's eponymous weapon jabbed and spun with expert handling. Taking advantage of its reach, Jarle kept the fumbling swordsman mech out of range while slowly chipping away at the gaping hole in its chest.

"Damn it, if I had my daggers, I'd already be peeling open this can of worms!"

It took an entirely different set of skills to handle a spear compared to a pair of daggers. What got to Jarle the most was that his opponent read most of his moves like he was an open book.

Despite his earlier setback, the enemy pilot was still a highly skilled swordsman. Jarle had to take advantage of his opponent's failing machine to get an edge. In addition, after hundreds of duels, Jarle had slowly become used to the unwieldy weapon.

After parrying aside another sword slash, the DarkSpear plunged forward abruptly with its strong legs and shoulder bashed the swordsman mech. It

dealt relatively minor damage to its opponent, but successfully threw the swordsman mech off balance.

Even as the swordsman mech slashed wide in a last-ditch effort to deter an attack, the DarkSpear took the blow head on, allowing its free arm to be amputated while the other arm thrust its spear into damaged sections of the swordsman mech.

The victory message hardly sated Jarle as the virtual battlefield winked out of existence. This fight shouldn't have turned into an open brawl. Almost every opponent he met as of late survived the initial charge and fought back with the ferocity of a wounded bear.

"This mech is getting kind of boring." Jarle spoke to his viewers once his cockpit shimmered away and threw him back to his lobby. "Do you think I should pilot something new?"

His viewers expressed divided opinions. Some wanted him to carry the DarkSpear all the way to the top of the Diamond League while others missed his more conventional skirmisher style.

Jarle grinned at the comments and responded with a simple message. "I'll think about it."

After answering a few more questions, he said his goodbyes and shut off his stream. As he emerged from his simulator pod, he felt oddly empty now that he left the virtual cockpit behind.

The DarkSpear had a way of compelling him to return and assassinate more mechs. Even piloting his competition mechs felt hollow in comparison. Personally, Jarle figured that the novelty of piloting such a unique variant must have infected his mood.

While Jarle left the simulator room and headed for the showers, his agent suddenly appeared.

"Jarle! I've got something interesting for you!"

"What is it?"

"There's this kid called Gavin Neumann on the line. He says he represents the mech designer who came up with the DarkSpear you're messing around lately. He wants to enter into a minor sponsorship agreement with you!"

Jarle frowned at his agent. Minor sponsorship agreement usually netted him and his team a paltry sum. "I thought I told you to refuse all these petty deals. I've long grown beyond grovelling for pennies."

The early career of a mech athlete always revolved around money. Jarle remembered that he used to sign contracts for baby feed and dog toys back when he started out.

"Hey, it's not like that. This is more of a temporary thing where you pimp the DarkSpear for a couple of weeks." His agent replied defensively. "Gavin is claiming that the mech designer is willing to design a customized virtual DarkSpear for you."

That attracted his attention. Like any mech pilot, Jarle appreciated custom mechs. Unlike the general models on the market that had been designed to accommodate as many pilots as possible, custom mechs allowed their pilots to bring out their full strength at any time.

Mech athletes like Jarle hardly ever showed any interest if someone threw a money chip containing millions of credits in front of his feet. On the other hand, the moment a decent mech designer offered to design a custom mech, they'd all be slobbering like dogs.

Jarle only kept his composure due to the fact that he'd merely be getting a customized virtual mech. Even then, his constant longing for the DarkSpear made it very difficult to set this offer aside.

"Tell me more. How much work do I have to do to earn this custom mech?"

Chapter 217 Small Job

Ves left the job of establishing contact to his publicist. Gavin worked efficiently and contacted the Fireflies for a sponsorship offer.

To Gavin's surprise, Jarle expressed interest in obtaining a custom virtual mech. That left the door open to negotiations, which Gavin and Jarle's agent quickly hammered out.

Since the deal did not require much formality, the two sides came to a simple understanding.

In absolute terms, Ves provided Jarle with an exclusive customized virtual DarkSpear. He'd design the unique machine after a talk with Jarle over the comm and after he received a list of specifications.

Since they wanted to get this done as quickly as possible before the new duelling season began, Ves would not take more than a few days to complete the custom design.

Once Ves had done his part, Jarle would pilot his custom job and promote the DarkSpear model for a certain number of hours per week. The mech athlete and streamer would continue to pimp the DarkSpear model for a month.

The actual contract looked a lot more complicated, but put simply, Ves got his first spokesperson for the huge and largely untapped Bentheim market.

Gavin visited the workshop to brief Ves on the contract and get him to sign a few documents. He also had a lot of questions about the deal.

"Isn't it premature to expand your brand presence in Bentheim? I thought we already agreed on our marketing strategy. Diverting too much attention on the virtual market makes no sense. The real and virtual markets are too different from each other. Even if you spend a lot of effort on your virtual models, your actual earnings won't increase by all that much."

Ves understood Gavin's doubts, but he had to grow his ability to earn lots of DP. "I don't entirely agree with you on that point. Marcella tells me that many of my customers who bought the Mark II became convinced of its craftsmanship after trying out some of my virtual models. In addition, higher sales figures of my virtual product lines will also translate to confidence in the quality of my real mechs."

"It will be a blip in the ocean. Jarle is hardly the most popular celebrity from Bentheim. Without a constant media presence, your brand will quickly fall into obscurity."

His words rang true. As the local mecca of mech production and export, Bentheim was saturated with thousands of brands. At the LMC's current scale, it had no hopes of competing with these long-established household names.

Still, Ves didn't need to put in a lot of effort to cobble up a custom virtual DarkSpear, and he got plenty of short-term benefits out of the weeks-long promotion. As long as his sales for his latest virtual mech surpassed ten thousand units, he'd earn 100,000 DP in total. Ves needed the huge sum to shore up his skills and attributes to design a decent original mech.

Despite Gavin's skepticism, Ves still went through with his plans. Before Gavin left, he wanted to ask a question that had been burning in his mind for a while.

"Boss? I'd like you to clear something up for me."

"Yes?"

"Well, it's like this. I've been analyzing the sales patterns of your virtual mechs and compared them to your peers. One pattern happened to stand out like a sore thumb. Your customer retention is off the charts. Anyone who buys one

of your virtual mechs is several times more likely to buy another mech designed by you. This usually doesn't happen to newcomers in the market."

Consumers never really paid attention to the mech designer when they purchased a product from the low-end of the virtual market. They only cared about specs and their personal feelings about the mech.

Most mech designers who started out wished to make a name for themselves and their businesses. A mech manufacturer with a steady amount of repeat customers would never have to worry about missing their sales targets as long as they didn't screw up.

"I've focused a lot on improving the piloting experience." Ves answered simply. "I'm guessing that my customers have caught on its benefits. I'm sure you've found that out yourself when you asked around."

"It's beyond that. Some of your customers are oddly attached to their mechs, to the point where they treat them as affectionately as pets. I'm rather concerned because this effect is very pronounced in certain cases. It reminds me of the Farund Affair."

"Heavens no!" Ves immediately denied. "I haven't messed around with the neural interfaces. This is nothing like the Farund Affair."

The Farund Affair stood out as the first and only case where a company managed to brainwash its customers with its virtual mechs. Back then, the simulator pod manufacturers competed against each other on how well they could make their simulations come to life. They all increased the intensity of their neural interfaces with each new generation of pods.

This uncontrolled growth of neural intensity led to some companies taking advantage of this phenomenon by messing around with the neural interfaces of their mechs. Most tried to be subtle and added a minor addictive element to

their interfaces. For a couple of years, these shady companies saw steady growth as their models grew in popularity.

Farund Inc. obviously didn't get the message. Its brash CEO jacked up all of the settings to the maximum. In the short term, his company rose like a rocket as sales ballooned almost exponentially. It became a major sensation in the virtual market as its models became increasingly dominant in the mech simulator games of that time.

Sadly for Farund, the good times didn't last together. A few mech designers got suspicious and started poking around at Farund's many designs. Their actual specs were nothing special, but each test pilot became instant converts the moment they piloted the virtual mechs.

The horrifying consequences of Farund's mechs finally came to light when researchers found out about the tampered neural interfaces. The scandal ruined the company overnight and the MTA arrested all of its executives and mech designers. They only took a week to sentence them to death.

Even then, many of its victims required years of therapy in order to wean off the urge to pilot any of Farund's mechs. A million or so of its most devoted fans had played with the virtual mechs for so long that their condition became practically incurable. The MTA took them all in and nobody had ever heard from them again.

These days, virtual mechs received much closer scrutiny. Iron Spirit certified every virtual mech submitted to its marketplace and they often flatly refused any mech that included non-standard neural interfaces. In addition, manufacturers of simulator pods cleaned up their act and pulled back some of their most extreme innovations.

In this light, Gavin's question made little sense. Even if Ves had any nefarious intentions, he'd never get away with it with all the precautions introduced after the Farund Affair.

After Gavin made the arrangements, Ves faced a projector which fizzled into the image of Captain Jarle Brenthill. The man truly looked gifted in both looks and talent. Even Ves felt a little bit oppressed when faced with a celebrity of this magnitude.

"Hello Jarle. It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise." The mech athlete responded perfunctory while he studied Ves.

"You've got a sturdy body. Are you working out?"

"Ah, no. It's due to a mishap that messed with my genetics."

"Well, I still have some training to catch up to, so I'll make it short. First, I got our resident mech designer to form up a list of what I'd like to include in my custom mech. I'd appreciate it if you can meet at least two-thirds of what I've noted down."

Jarle sent the virtual document over to Ves, who opened it up and skimmed through the points. The mech athlete's priorities had been formatted in precise language that told Ves exactly what to do. That made his job much easier than if he merely had a brief talk with Jarle.

"I see that you wish to change the DarkSpear's default weapon from a spear to a pair of daggers." Ves carefully noted. The document even included an exact set of dimensions for the pair of blades. "This... I can see why you prefer the daggers, but my mech favors forward momentum over agile footwork. Those weapons will not be a good fit for my current frame."

"Don't worry about it. I'll make it work. As long as you can increase the range of motion and the responsiveness of the arms, I'll be okay with my baby."

"The arms are already optimized for thrusting and absorbing shocks. If you want me to increase their range of motion, I'll have to take away some of its other abilities."

"Then do so. I'm fine with such a trade."

Fortunately, Jarle set realistic expectations for his custom mech. He set a few other reasonable conditions that Ves agreed to without much objection. As a consummate professional who piloted dozens of mechs in his career, he knew what kind of limitations mech designers faced. Most professionals picked up on some basic knowledge from the design world as they came into contact with different mechs.

Only spoiled brats like Vincent Ricklin who only ever trained with one or two models asked for something as dumb as a codpiece for their mechs.

Overall, Ves understood Jarle's desires for his custom mech and it was his job to make it into reality. After cutting off the connection after an hour of discussion, Ves mulled on how to go about this project.

His main concern was to preserve the model's excellent X-Factor. Ves faced a difficult puzzle in that the X-Factor for the DarkSpear had already been set in stone. Even if Ves updated its design in the future, the assassin mech always became defined by its ability to charge from stealth.

Ves recalled the few times he went back to a design and changed the schematic. The Marc Antony Mark II came to mind. Ves did not really depart from his vision, but he made such a radical redesign that it could even be considered an entirely new variant rather than an update from the Mark I.

Even then, Ves did not stray too far from his original vision. He merely defined them in explicit terms so that he had a better grip on the just-developed Triple Division technique.

For this project, Ves considered whether he could grant his custom design an entirely new gestalt.

"It's worth a try. I doubt this will end badly. At worst, I'll just scrap my work if I end up with a muddle-headed design."

He activated his design suite and loaded in a copy of the DarkSpear's design schematic. When Ves looked at the assassin mech, he felt that every shape and marking hid a portion of the Last Spear's will. For a moment, Ves dreaded the thought of tearing this mental creation apart.

He shook his head. "What am I hesitating about? It's just a copy."

Even if he butchered this particular copy, it didn't affect the main design. While he intuitively thought that every permutation of a design should share the same strain of X-Factor, in reality each copy took on its own separate existence.

This was one of the biggest reasons why the X-Factor could never show its full strength in the virtual world. The virtual mechs never lasted long enough to develop its history.

With this perspective in mind, Ves steeled himself and visualised a knife in his mind. With the ruthless care of a pet owner about to end the life of a suffering dog, he struck at the image central to this image.

CLANG!

The Last Spear's manifestation showed up at the last possible moment and parried the mental knife with his spear! The rebound from the failed strike rattled Ves to the point where he took a few steps backward.

The image associated with the DarkSpear had developed its own instincts for life. It could even detect a threat against its existence and put up a defence!

Ordinarily, Ves would rejoice that he developed his X-Factor to the point where it developed a form of autonomy. Now, it made things harder, for Ves found to his surprise that the Last Spear's manifestation possessed just enough strength to withstand his mental attacks.

In essence, Ves could not even overcome his own creation!

Chapter 218 Undermine

"Perhaps I'm going at it the wrong way."

Ves tried to kill the image embedded into a copy of the DarkSpear's design in various ways. No matter what kind of weapon he materialized in his mind, the stubborn manifestation of the Last Spear always parried his attempts.

Each time he got rebuffed, his mental stability took another hit. His brain became so disarrayed that he had to halt his attempts to kill the image.

"Maybe that's the problem. I'm not treating it with respect."

Ves realized he fell into the trap he often accused others of falling for all the time. His design was not some commodity to be used and discarded at will. It possessed its own determination to live, at least in his conception of how the multiverse worked.

Despite his strong visualization, Ves could never really rule out that everything that happened earlier was just a figment of his imagination. The further he delved into the X-Factor, the more he relied on intuition instead of theory backed by solid science.

Still, the image was so strong that it couldn't be imaginary. His headaches felt very real.

After trying and failing to take the forceful approach, Ves tried to use a gentler means to coax the image.

"I need you to be able to wield a pair of daggers. Will you let me change your fighting style?"

The manifestation objected strongly to this change. He wielded the spear like it was his sacred duty. Even if he shifted his profession from a royal guard to a slinking assassin, he never got rid of his determination to slay his enemies with the weapon of his choice. Taking up a pair of daggers made the manifestation feel dirty.

Ves only had himself to blame for these personality traits. In his original vision, the DarkSpear focused completely on wielding its spear to its maximum effect. He threw no consideration to any alternatives due to a lack of carrying capacity. Even adding in a backup knife ruined its balance.

Against the intractable Last Spear, Ves made no headway in achieving any sort of compromise. The manifestation did not even leave the door open to negotiation. He didn't even blame the stubborn creation for refusing his overtures.

Even if Ves expressed his sincerity, his patience had a limit.

Perhaps he could make another attempt by starting over, but Ves did not wish to leave this problem unfulfilled. There might be a time in the future where he had to make some changes on the fly. If he still didn't possess a solution to this problem, he'd be facing constant setbacks and delays.

He took a step back and tried to parse the situation. The manifestation inhabiting the copy of the DarkSpear design never showed any signs of tiring. Where did it get its energy? Was it inexhaustible or could Ves slowly chip away at its reserves?

If he could figure out this puzzle, he may be able to come up with a means to wear down this stubborn image.

Then he thought about how the X-Factor centered around the unity of the mech designer, mech and mech pilot. Leaving the pilot out of consideration, what if Ves forcibly tried to change the design with an overriding image? Could he impose his own vision over the original design and therefore change the fundamental makeup of the X-Factor?

As much as Ves treated the images like living beings, they exhibited many traits that left them open to exploitation. "They exist in the imaginary realm and have to obey the rules that govern their existence. They aren't solid in a way that makes them unassailable. If I can chip away at their foundation, I can open a crack in their defenses."

Ves took a break in order to get his mind back in order. He played around with Lucky and cataloged the gems he excreted lately. The cat lately complained about an insufficiency of high quality minerals, so Ves had to order a new shipment of premium ores to stop Lucky's badgering.

"What's another million or so credits?" He ruefully told himself. "Compared to my cat's wellbeing, money is no objection."

His cat ate so much minerals and only produced a couple of gems in the end. The disparity between input and output was so huge that Ves wondered how his mechanical cat's digestion actually worked.

Did Lucky convert low-quality minerals to high quality alloys within its digestive system or did he turn it into pure energy?

Both possibilities seem outlandish considering Lucky's size. Only the most advanced labs could accomplish such a feat.

Other than cutting him open, Ves had no way to be sure. He left the problem aside and decided to catch up on the news.

He visited the galactic net and saw much of the same doom and gloom. Rising costs started to trickle down to the consumers and everyone felt the

pinch. Their willingness to spend more on luxury goods declined, which caused several businesses catering to these markets to decline in turn.

The Republic's economy slowly transitioned into war footing. Production of mechs, turrets, carriers and a vast amount of supplies ramped up in preparation of half a decade of war. Naturally, the bulk of these extra orders went to the big established companies. Small fry like his Living Mech Corporation barely benefited from this upsurge of demand. In fact, the rising cost of production negated most of his gains.

"How is House Kaine doing these days?"

With the expedition over, House Kaine and Ves went their separate ways. By now, the Ark Horizon should have made the journey back to the Grey Willow Star Sector.

Ves searched the news and found that Lord Kaine had made some waves upon his return. House Kaine had actually been in bad shape for a while and even stood to lose its most valuable planets. However, the successful expedition turned the tables on the vultures that preyed for their fall.

With a new champion in the form of Felicity Kaine, House Kaine successfully gained prominence through a number of duels against rival houses. The major reason why she won the duel was because her Cathrec received an overhaul that vastly increased its power generation.

Finally, House Kaine announced a number of partnerships with the CFA, which also contributed to their ascendancy. With the tacit backing of a behemoth in the form of the Common Fleet Alliance, House Kaine didn't have to worry about rivals trying to undermine them in secret for a couple of years.

"The CFA must have gotten a great haul out of the Groening System."

Much of the frontier remained untouched by human greed. The galaxy was simply too large to be explored in its entirety. Treasure and danger coexisted

alongside each other in this vast sea of stars. House Kaine happened to have gambled and won in their last ditch effort to make a big score.

Still, Ves knew how fraught it had been at certain times. The news only celebrated the success stories. For every successful expedition, ten more crashed and burned. Out here in the frontier, people regarded treasure hunting as delayed form of suicide.

After Ves finished his recovery, he summoned up the copy of the design and prepared for round two. This time, he opted to go for an indirect approach, seeing as he could never beat the vigilant manifestation in a head-on clash.

First, Ves adjusted his vision for the DarkSpear. He visualized his custom mech's performance if Ves adopted Jarle's suggestions. The frame took on a slightly different shape that enhanced its flexibility. Its prominent spear made way for a pair of blackened curved daggers. The mech's overall paint scheme took on a Mosville blue shade, with the team logo prominently replacing the royal emblem on its chest.

Now that he had his vision, Ves turned his attention to constructing the right accompanying image. He had to be careful with this step because he didn't wish to ruin his custom mech's X-Factor by destroying its original identity.

"I have to supplement the image somehow."

Ves had a good idea on how to go about it. First, he constructed a simple image centered around Jarle Brenthill. He summoned another projector and let it display some highlights of the mech athlete's career. A vague entity emerged in his mind that carried the essence of Jarle's piloting style.

"This should be close enough."

Then he slowly started tweaking the actual design. He already prepared his plans beforehand, so he worked swiftly in dismantling his design's original arrangements. Ves avoided bumping into the manifestation. Instead, he solely

focused on his new vision and image and tried to embed it into his current work.

This time, he encountered no obstruction. The manifestation of his design's X-Factor started to take on different traits as Ves slowly changed the fundamental nature of his design. The schematic and its accompanying X-Factor turned from a pure spear wielder into a transitional form that made it better at wielding daggers.

It was as if a drop of black paint had fallen onto a bucket of water. The previously clear water became murkier as it took on a grey shade. The longer Ves worked, the more drops of paint fell down into the bucket.

In the meantime, the manifestation didn't even realize its own contradictory nature. The image flickered a lot as it couldn't decide whether to wield a spear or a pair of daggers.

The dichotomy became more pronounced as Ves continued to work on the design for the next couple of days. The design steadily reached a tipping point where its original identity of a spear wielder became lost.

"Now should be a good time."

Ves switched the spear for a pair of daggers he already prepared beforehand. The curved weapons fit the new design like a glove. For a moment, he expected explosions, but nothing drastic resulted from this action. The manifestation slowly warped and solidified into a dagger wielder. Its appearance even resembled Jarle.

"It worked!"

He learned something new with attempt. His images drew their strength from their source. Affecting the source allowed Ves to affect the original X-Factor in a form that fit his modifications better. He felt relieved that he didn't have to go

back to the drawing board each time he wanted to update his design or derive a custom mech out of one of his models.

The ramifications of this experiment affected more than just his own models. Ves wondered if he could apply the same method to other designs or mechs. He could even use it as a subtle form of sabotage.

"If I ever happen to be working on a mech for someone I hate, I can subsume its X-Factor with a malevolent spirit. Even if every inspection checks out, the mech will still perform worse than normal."

He quickly discarded the idea. Something like that would never happen. Mech pilots wanted people he could trust to work on their mechs. Putting an enemy in charge of your own war materiel was just asking for trouble.

Now that he solved the biggest issue, Ves resumed his design work and finalized his modifications. Most of the changes required a decent amount of testing that ate up a lot of time, but Ves wanted to insure he delivered a flawless product. The fate of the sponsorship deal and Jarle's enthusiasm for his endorsement mattered a lot.

"This is going to be my first proper entry into the Bentheim market. Once the DarkSpear catches on, my other models will see a surge in popularity."

Once that happened, Ves gained a foothold in the notoriously crowded Bentheim mech scene. He expected to boost both his virtual and real business activities from that point.

According to the latest shipping update, his new equipment should arrive at his workshop in the coming week. Once he unpacked his goodies and installed them on the workshop floor, he'd be ready for the next phase in his business plan.

"I'm still short on money, though."

With only a couple of component licenses under his belt, Ves needed at least a dozen more to round out his collection. With his company's current war chest, he'd be hard pressed to license a set of decent components that could fit his minimum standards.

He intended to design a premium mech, after all. He should invest at least a billion credits in this area to avoid inconsistencies in his original design.

"Where can I find some money!"

Short of exchanging his valuable merits or finding an opportunity to make a quick buck, Ves considered whether he should take another loan.

Chapter 219 Vintage

With the declining profitability of his only Mark II production model, Ves could not sit back and wait. His rough projection of the future revealed that his profits diminished at an alarmingly fast rate.

While he considered taking another loan, Ves ruled that out after figuring he did not wish to become more reliant on external actors that might not have his best interests at heart. Banks that extended huge loans to companies often demanded a voice on how to run the company.

Ves absolutely abhorred such a possibility.

As for selling merits, he'd be making a huge loss if he went through with such a transaction. Merits were extremely valuable and hard to come by. Even a single merit represented a chance to obtain priceless knowledge that he couldn't get from the System.

While the System's Skill Tree allowed him to learn many standard skills, Ves learned that they contained no personality. What he meant by this was that the knowledge held no biases or special insights developed over a long period of designing mechs. Sometimes, this should be an advantage, but other times

Ves would miss out on crucial perspectives like Master Olson's focus on endurance and longevity.

Ves vaguely sensed the System's requirements for advancing a skill from Journeyman-level to Senior-level demanded a thorough understanding of the field. This meant that he had to broaden his range and become acquainted with many different viewpoints held by different experts in the field.

Mech designers ordinarily hoarded such knowledge. Even the System didn't provide him with different perspectives on the same subject. Thus, merits formed the only way for him to advance in the future.

"I can still decide to exchange it later as a last ditch effort." He decided. He hadn't exhausted all of his other methods.

He decided to follow his mech broker's suggestion and look for events where he could showcase his ability. A quick search on the galactic net returned dozen of conferences, competitions, show events and exhibitions starting in the next couple of months in the Republic alone.

Most of these occasions demanded strict requirements to any participating mech designer. No ordinary Dick, Tom and Harry would be allowed to bring their horrible designs and amateurish mechs.

The classiest events that attracted the richest clientele only opened their doors to Journeyman Mech Designers and higher. Ves had to rule these prestigious events out and lower his sights to those that welcomed Apprentice Mech Designers like himself. These occasions generally drew a poorer crowd that cared more about getting a bargain than ordering a quality mech.

He shook his head. "These sound more like flea markets than proper opportunities to show your talent."

Ves studiously combed through the various events and tried to find one which offered him the best possibility to close a lucrative deal.

He found one in the Vintage Festival.

It celebrated the coming passing of lastgen mechs into obsolescence. With the next generation of mechs about to arrive, a number of people who grew up during the rise of lastgen mechs more than twenty years ago found it difficult to say their goodbyes to these reliable workhorses.

To them, their love of lastgen mechs represented a nostalgic love of their childhood experienced. They used to play with toys of lastgen mechs and played the models in virtual simulations in their adolescence. Even if their performance had fallen off these days, their heartfelt love for this period of mech development remained more important than the specs of the following generation of mechs.

"These are my kind of guys." Ves remarked with gleaming eyes. Many of the attendants to these festivals had money to spend and didn't care too much about the latest innovations. They only wanted go back in the past and relive the glory days of the last generation of mechs. They'd easily overspend on anything that struck their fancy.

The only problem was that many of his fellow mech designers knew this as well. While the Vintage Festival allowed Apprentice Mech Designers to showcase their lastgen designs, they conducted a strict selection of every applicant.

The only upside to the Festival was that Journeyman Mech Designers disdained to compete on sales at such an event. These well-established mech designers focused more on selling their currentgen designs than revisiting soon-to-be-extinct dinosaurs, so not a lot of journeymen bothered to take notice of the event.

The few that did sign up for the Festival mainly wanted to show off their vintage prestige models in the centerpiece exhibition. The majority of the

actual sales occurred in the side halls where various hopeful apprentices hoped to make some easy money from their outdated production licenses.

"There's one thing strange about this Vintage Festival. Why would the Vintage Festival which focuses so much on lastgen mechs invite younger designers to sell their mechs?"

Some of them hadn't even been born during the golden years of this period. Ves himself barely remembered anything of that generation.

He came up with a number of guesses. The most probable reason was that every enthusiast of lastgen mechs already owned genuine vintage models, or simply found them to be old and familiar. Perhaps they wanted to see what the younger crop of mech designers could make out of this old period in mech history.

"Lets see how past Festivals have gone."

When Ves read through the articles of past Vintage Festivals, he got the sense that these middle-aged customers sought two things at once. They wanted to see and purchase great models that brought them back to the past, but they also wanted to see something fresh that proved that lastgen mechs hadn't reached the end of the road.

These two desires contradicted each other. Many apprentices either stuck to the base model and tried to reproduce them as faithfully as possible, or designed radical new variants that performed much better than the originals.

The downsides to each approach resulted in poor sales to most apprentices hoping to earn some money. Those that tread familiar ground could never surpass the models fabricated by the original manufacturers. Those that spent a lot of effort designing new variants ended up with models so far removed from lastgen mechs that they lost the essence of that period.

Some apprentices tried to take the middle road by making only minor tweaks to the base model, but many visitors shook their heads at these timid attempts to present something remarkable. The mech designer's lack of courage reflected back in their work, which often looked and felt as if designed by a bot.

"It's not easy to persuade the visitors to pull out their wallets. None of these people are easy to please." Ves surmised after reading through the summaries of the public sales reports.

While it didn't include any private transactions with special conditions, many mech designers struggled to make a sale.

Ves hoped to succeed where many others had failed. Unlike the other designers, Ves had a secret weapon. Mechs with an abundant level of X-Factor evoked strong emotion to anyone who saw them. Such machines should make a powerful impact in the sea of mediocre mechs that others put on display.

The entire festival revolved around the themes of nostalgia and authenticity. These were subjective criteria that could only be judged with feeling and emotion, something which Ves had a lot of practice in bending them to his will.

"If I can get this right, I'll have the crowd eating from the palm of my hand."

He decided to apply for the festival.

When Ves looked at the requirements to participate, he found them to be troublesome but attainable. The Vintage Festival only offered a venue to mech designers who were able to deliver. Since Ves owned his own workshop, he possessed ample qualifications to participate.

He only found a snag when he found out that he had to present at least three different models to the organization. The Festival took place about a month later, but the deadline for participation ended only three weeks from now.

"I'll have to work hard to meet this deadline."

Fortunately, his new machines should arrive in time for him to produce an original Caesar Augustus.

Yes, Ves wanted to fabricate the expensive, untarnished original Caesar Augustus. With the imminent arrival of his alloy compressor and CTM, his workshop finally gained the capability to reproduce the base model's highly advanced armor system.

It should be the centerpiece of his presentation. Even though the white elephant flopped on the market, its iconic look and features made it live to see a bright future in the form of toys, action figures and simulator reproductions. Many of the kids and teenagers at that time aspired to pilot this prestigious model.

The main challenge Ves faced with this model was to determine the right feel for this model. He once toured a couple of mech halls on Bentheim and personally witnessed a couple of great examples of the Caesar Augustus.

Each designer or fabricator left their own unique imprint behind in their work. Even though their influence was slight, it still provided the mechs with their own unique flavor. The better designers left a stronger mark behind.

"There's a lot of depth behind each quality reproduction."

The very best copies fabricated by the very best mech designers conveyed a strong blend of flavors that told a rich story. Even though their strength paled in comparison to what Ves could accomplish on his own, their rich experience and untold depths of knowledge provided them with a distinct advantage.

"It's like comparing a candy to a moldy cheese. Even if the candy offers a very strong flavor, those with more sophisticated tastes will prefer the cheese."

Ves had to tread carefully in this matter. If he failed to impress the crowd with his chosen vision, he could say goodbye to any potential sales.

Besides the Caesar Augustus, Ves planned to offer a gold label Marc Antony Mark II as the second model in his application. The Mark II represented a modern, cheaper take on the Caesar Augustus, which should ordinarily not sell very well in an event like the Vintage Festival.

His recent experience with modifying the DarkSpear gave him an idea on how to tackle this problem. He could modify the Mark II both visually and emotionally in order to appeal to the festival goers. Even if it was a longshot, it was worth a try.

"In any case, the Mark II already satisfies the condition."

Besides tinkering with the X-Factor, the two models required no additional work. Ves understood both designs from top to bottom, so he could immediately begin to fabricate them as soon as he received his shipment of raw materials.

"I still have to figure something out for the third model."

While Ves could take the lazy route and offer the old Mark I, he really didn't wish to embarrass himself. The Mark I was vastly inferior to the Mark II and should be consigned to the recycler. His pride as a mech designer refused to consider showing up at the Vintage Festival with the Mark I as an example of his current ability.

That left the most time-consuming option. "I'll have to design a new variant."

Since Ves already planned to offer an original model and a radical variant, he figured he should offer something that fit in between. Even though the Festival disdained such boring machines, Ves felt confident he could break the mold with the help of the X-Factor.

"The less changes I make, the faster I can get this done."

With a time limit of a couple of weeks, Ves couldn't afford to invest his attention on another radical variant. He blamed himself for not checking out these kinds of events sooner. Some of them really provided a good opportunity for him to make some money.

With a tentative plan in place, Ves decided to consult his mech broker and his publicist. As professional marketers, he should listen to their advice.

Chapter 220 Suckers

When Ves called Marcella and told her of his plan, she responded with a thoughtful look.

"Ordinarily, I'd advise apprentices to stay away from this crowd. The people who purchase mechs at the Vintage Festivals have their heads stuck in the past. What they consider to be a good mech can be very different from what you and I think are good."

Basically, his mech broker called them fanboys and fangirls who exhibited irrational love for lastgen mechs. Even if they saw the latest cutting edge mech designed by a renowned master, they'd scoff at their fancy modern features.

"I can't say I understand them, but my unique specialties should appeal to their tastes. I'm confident I can make an impact at the festival."

"You do have that quality." Marcella admitted with a thoughtful expression.

"Yes, if you tailor your mechs in a way that amplifies the 'good old days' feel of the last generation, you'll be able to tug at the heartstrings of your customers."

She offered to facilitate his application to participate at the festival. In addition, she promised to staff his booth with some savvy employees who could do the heavy lifting in terms of persuading visitors to purchase his mechs.

Naturally, she also received a cut out of these sales.

Marcella also warned him about a troublesome phenomenon. "One thing you should know is that the customers who attend these festivals will often decide with their guts instead of their brains. Around a third of these people will come to regret their impulse purchase when they sober up. Expect them to call us up to cancel their orders."

Ves frowned at that. "Is there any way to stop this? Why not rule out cancellations in the sales contract?"

"That's bad form and prohibited by the MTA. It protects your customers from being bamboozled into signing awful contracts. Your best bet is to have an ample stock of finished mechs that you can ship out immediately. Once your customers get their hands on your mechs, they'll find it a lot harder to demand a refund."

The battle over consumer and producer rights tilted back and forth over the centuries. Currently, the ascendancy of the MTA granted mech manufacturers more protection than before, though their protection only applied if the mechs went through certification.

Uncertified mechs like those that had been assembled on the cheap by taking advantage of the repair scam or pirated licenses enjoyed no such protection. Both the seller and buyer risked getting screwed by each other as no one guaranteed their transaction.

In general, any mech that passed certification carried a guarantee by the MTA that the machine had no defects and hadn't been sabotaged in any way. Once a customer gained possession of such a mech and didn't issue any complaints, he'd be stuck with it from that point onwards.

This meant that he couldn't accidentally crash the mech and demand a refund from the manufacturer afterwards. The mech was sound and didn't carry any

defects in terms of navigation or locomotion. The fault lay solely in the mech pilot who trashed the new machine.

"So what you're saying is the only way to prevent more refunds is if I can deliver my mechs as fast as possible?" Ves frowned at the implications.

"The best solution is to fabricate an ample stock of mechs in advance and ship them over to Bentheim. When the festival starts, you can transfer the mechs into the hands of your customers at the very same day. Don't give them time to reconsider time to reconsider their purchase if you want to maximize your earnings."

What his mech broker said made sense, but it represented a very large bet to Ves. If he attended the festival with dozens of models stashed in a warehouse but failed to sell the majority of his stock, he'd be stuck with an awful lot of wasted mechs. Outside of the Vintage Festival, these nostalgia-ridden mechs carried no appeal to regular consumers.

"I won't fabricate more than a single copy of each mech I plan to sell." Ves eventually decided. "Your idea has merit, but my liquid funds can only stretch so far. I'd be using up my entire drawer of cash if I fabricate more copies of the Caesar Augustus or any other comechs."

Comechs stood short for compressed armor mechs. In first and second-rate states, such a terms would be redundant, because pretty much every battle mech incorporated some form of compressed armor.

Only in resource-starved third-rate states did people find it necessary to distinguish comechs from unmechs, the unflattering term for cheap mechs built with uncompressed armor.

"That's your decision to make." Marcella responded with a touch of understanding. "Do make sure to prepare for an intense period of fabrication. The longer you take to deliver your product, the higher the chance your orders

get cancelled. If you let your customers wait for months, you will stand to lose a lot of potential earnings."

With the Dortmund printer and his new set of equipment shipped from Leemar, Ves didn't worry too much about this possibility. His workshop would soon be capable of fabricating mechs at a rate of one per day once he mastered the equipment and beefed up the staffing.

After finishing his talk with Marcella, he consulted Gavin to hear from another perspective. His publicist's face turned into an eager expression when he heard how Ves described the clientele.

"I know the type. They're suckers. They're the sort of people who will throw away their entire life savings on a toy that is shiny enough in their eyes. The key is to make your product shine bright enough that they can't see the flaws through all of the glare."

"What do you suggest?"

Gavin had some useful advice to accomplish this feat. "Impose artificial scarcity on the products that you're offering at the festival. Give them enough unique traits and add an exclusive-sounding label like Legacy Edition or Limited Edition and promise not to produce more than ten or so copies of each model. This way, you'll limit the amount of work you have in store and maximize the profits of each individual sale."

His suggestion sounded similar to what Marcella once said. Ves declined to complicate his product offering back then because he didn't want to end up with a messy catalog.

Now that he was awfully short on money, Ves reconsidered his decision. It sounded like an easy way to distinguish his products and the changes he planned to make with the X-Factor. These wouldn't be regular mechs intended for the open market.

Pulling this off required a careful judgement on the amount of copies he intended to sell for each model. Fabricating too many copies diminished the exclusive nature of each design.

However, if he went too far in the other direction, he'd earn a paltry sum even if he managed to boost his profit margin on the few models he sold.

Fortunately, Ves didn't have to figure this out on his own. "Can you analyze the market and determine the optimal amount of mechs to sell? The key is to maximize out earnings, not our profit margin. I need lots of cold hard cash to fund the development of a new design."

"I can do that, but I can only get you the most accurate results if I know how good your designs catch on to your target audience."

"You can develop three scenarios then." Ves suggested. "One where my sales fall flat, one where there is modest interest and one where my models catch fire. We can leave the actual figures ambiguous until we're able to gauge the actual response to my works."

Gavin immediately went to work after receiving his assignment.

As for Ves, before he turned his attention to his new projects, he wanted to catch up to how Jarle Brenthill had been taking his new virtual mech. He opened up his terminal and visited the mech athlete's livestream.

"The Rushing Storm does it again! Another mech down for the count!"

A bombastic battlefield came into view as Jarle's custom mech had just emerged from stealth and rushed to the rear of an enemy squad. Unlike his previous duels, this time Jarle opted to play in one of the larger game modes.

Even if he rushed out alone, the enemy mechs became disarrayed. Ves had tweaked the Festive Cloud Generator to pump up even more vapor, this time dyed in Mosville Blue. The dark blue coloration added an electrifying

component to the assassin's mech rush. The rifleman mechs panicked and fired blindly in the direction of the approaching cloud.

The custom mech deftly dodged the direction of their aim. Jarle utilized a complicated spinning pattern to approach the enemy formation from a more vulnerable direction. The instant he approached a rifleman mech, his assassin mech struck with a flurry of deadly stabs, instantly striking all of its weak points.

The moment the rifleman mech got downed, Jarle turned to the next rifleman mech and struck its weapon aside before tearing it apart in a rapid example of battlefield deconstruction. Most of its companions hesitated on shooting back for fear of causing friendly fire. The two melee mechs of the squads tried to race to the rescue but Jarle's machine always seemed to dance away from their reach.

"Is this still an assassin mech?" Ves wondered with puzzlement.

Jarle's performance astounded him. While the custom mech lost its ability to cripple a mech with a single charge, its added agility allowed it to destroy several vulnerable mechs in quick succession before the enemy squad could form a proper response.

Once his momentum started to fade, the custom mech quickly turned around and sped away. The remnants of the enemy squad were in no shape to pursue, allowing Jarle to get away scott-free.

The amazing burst of explosiveness riled up the viewers of the stream. Jarle's viewership enjoyed a remarkable growth since the last time Ves visited the channel. Right now, he drew over two million viewers.

A quick check on his virtual sales dimmed his enthusiasm a bit. The DarkSpear only sold around four-thousand extra virtual copies, far below the

growth in viewership. It showed that while the viewers admired Jarle's display of murderous efficiency, they didn't attribute his success to his mech.

Despite this small disappointment, Ves was well on track on reaching his sales target of ten-thousand units sold. "I'll probably reach the maximum in one or two weeks."

Designing a custom mech for Jarle had been worth the effort. For a small bit of work, he accelerated his accumulation of DP by a fair pace.

His online account even received a lot of requests for him to design a custom virtual mech. Ves had no time to engage in this business, but it signalled that Ves had finally gained some renown.

With several projects in store and a lot of potential sales needing to be fulfilled, Ves finally got around to consider expanding his work force.

"It's time to get more manpower by my side."

Ves held several ambitions for his workshop personnel. They didn't need to be too capable, but they must be loyal and able to solve problems on their own. He greatly admired how House Kaine cultivated a capable group of mech technicians to staff their maintenance department. He planned to emulate their model for his own workshop.

"Let's start with hiring ten or so mech technicians. Any more and my workshop will become crowded."

With only two production lines, Ves expected to face relatively few issues at the beginning. Carlos and Ves had already made do with bots so far. In that regard, hiring mech technicians seem redundant, but once the LMC started to expand, the extra hands should prove useful.

To keep the mech technicians in line, Ves wanted to put a senior mech technician in charge. The chief technician should have ample experience and ideally plenty of leadership experience.

"It's going to get hard getting my hands on such a gem."

Mech manufacturers treasured these kinds of chief technicians. They possessed both rich experience and sound judgement and could solve a variety of difficult conundrums without asking for help from someone more knowledgeable.

Fortunately, Ves didn't have to take the trouble of seeking one out himself. The Larkinsons nurtured its own army of mech technicians. Perhaps he could snag one from his family's estate.

Ves prepared to call his grandfather.