

Chapter 231 Taxes

Regarding the Mech Designer System, Ves had many ideas on where to spend his DP. The most luxurious one would be to upgrade his stealth module on his comm, but that drained pretty much all of his recent earnings.

"It's better to spend them on skills and attributes this time."

The more he thought about the prospect of designing an original mech, the more he realized the daunting nature of the endeavor. Not only did he have to make a functional mech, he also had to make it sell.

A peculiar trend in the mech industry was that mechs with strong strengths and weaknesses sold better than they ought to. This pattern became especially prevalent in the lower segments of the market.

They considered balanced mechs with no obvious traits the safe and boring option. Many of the mainstream models throughout the galactic rim, heartland and center consisted of these kinds of mechs. Even if they were as flavorless as water, their excellent quality control and lack of exploitable weaknesses made them safe to deploy in large amounts.

Generally, the mech industry believed that newcomers should focus on their strengths rather than balance out their weaknesses. Mech pilots sought out mechs that complimented their strengths. Even if their favorite models came with caveats, knowing about them beforehand allowed them to mitigate these weaknesses.

"It's probably too much to aim for upgrading a Skill to Journeyman-level." Ves considered as he finalized the shipment of the final mechs.

Excluding the original show models, Ves completed the fabrication of three copies of the Marcus Aurelius, fifteen copies of the Caesar Augustus Eternal

Edition and around thirty-four copies of the Marc Antony Mark II Eternal Edition.

All of this should have taken more than a year in his old workshop, but with his new machines and mech technicians, he finished it all in just over two months. The speed at which his workshop completed the orders showcased the benefits of superior capital and labor.

"It's a bit daunting to sit around so many expensive machines. I also have to be responsible for my workers."

Even when Ves hired Carlos, Calsie and Gavin to help him manage the Living Mech Corporation, he always felt alone. In essence, he never really shed the sense that it was essentially a one-man operation.

Now, with the addition of eleven pair of hands in the workshop floor, every day turned lively. Even as they finally finished all the limited edition mechs, they still had a busy week ahead with the fabrication of the regular silver label Mark II's.

One benefit of his high-profile participation in the Vintage Festival was that the demand for his products spiked up. Marcella often received solicitations for Ves to fabricate a Marcus Aurelius or a Caesar Augustus.

Sadly for the latecomers, Ves had no intentions reducing the scarcity of those mechs. They stopped being rare if too many copies circulated in the market.

Thus, most customers turned away when they heard that Ves stopped providing mechs of that caliber. The only model Ves offered freely were the silver label Mark II's. His well-practiced mech technicians eagerly tackled the challenge of fabricating the Mark II's without direct involvement from Ves.

With Carlos and Chief Cyril watching over the eager men and women, Ves had nothing to worry about on that end. They used the new production line for

the silver label Mark II's, which not only sped up the work, but also ensured the quality of the finished components.

The LMC sold an average of three silver label Mark II's per week. Despite tripling the rate of production, the drastically higher resource costs meant that his gross profits hadn't really increased all that much.

At this time, Ves also finished tallying up his finances for the end of the fiscal year.

Excluding the recent orders, the LMC accumulated around 700 million credits in regular business activities. The sum consisted of the investment made by the Larkinson family, the profits out of fulfilling orders for the gold and silver label Mark II's and the compensation for fulfilling 'irregular' orders.

To make the long story short, Ves earned around a billion credits in gross profits from the entire event. While Ves received more than that as payment for delivering the mechs, the painfully high resource costs as well as the minor cut to his mech broker reduced his earnings.

When Ves added various fees such as a one percent cut to the organizers of the festival and the various shipping and insurance costs, then Ves should thank his lucky stars that he still retained a billion credits.

Ves only briefly enjoyed the massive sum his company accumulated. Every business had to pay taxes, and the LMC was no different. Even though it benefited from several exemptions meant to ease the burden on startups, the LMC still had to cough up money to the planet and the state at an effective tax rate of twenty percent. The company paid fifteen percent to the central government and five percent to Cloudy Curtain's local government.

Furthermore, he also had to reserve money to pay for his other annual expenses. This included his electricity bill, which ballooned once the company

gained the new production line. It also included the annual compensation for Sanyal-Ablin for its combined security, convoy shipment and insurance costs.

"I also can't forget to add the interest payment for the old loan."

After deducting a depressing amount of expenses to his company's account, the LMC was left with only 1.4 billion credits in liquid cash.

"It's not the windfall I hoped for, but it's still a huge pile of money."

Ves amply met his goal of raising a vast sum of money. While it took a short couple of months to earn this sum, he finally gained some options with regards to completing his set of licenses.

Right now, without a solid draft for his first design, he held off on shopping for component licenses.

"It's like baking a pie. Even though I already know the type of pie I want to bake, I still don't know if I want the filling to be apples or blueberries."

He had to be careful with acquiring the right component licenses. With stagnant profits, Ves could not rely on his company to raise more cash in the event he wasted his current savings.

The main problem he faced right now was that Ves felt apprehensive about drafting an initial outline for his design. He vaguely sensed a gap in his mind that warned him that he missed something essential to design a good original mech.

Over the past couple of months, this feeling grew stronger, to the point where it even haunted his dreams. Specters of possible futures where he introduced his first original design with bombast, only to be ridiculed by the mech industry happened every night.

"What am I missing?" Ves puzzled over his conundrum. Was it experience? Inspiration? Skills?

Even without spending his DP, Ves considered himself to be amply prepared for the task. Many other Apprentice Mech Designers published their first original designs without the help of the System.

Leaving out the freaks and the direct disciples, Ves should be one of the most prepared Apprentice Mech Designers without an original design in his belt.

Perhaps he needed a break. Ves had worked non-stop for the last couple of months. Even though he mastered his new equipment and refined his Assembly skills through constant repetition, he still found the work to be tedious, especially since he had to focus his mind to imbue his mechs with the X-Factor.

"I've been wondering if you were still human." Chief Cyril joked as Ves admitted his frustrations. "You've worked harder than any of us. Even I take a couple of days off. The way you're putting all your passion in your mechs is admirable, but if your entire life resolves solely around designing and fabricating mechs, then you're no different from a human-shaped bot."

The remark startled Ves. When was the last time he put down his work and relaxed? He couldn't even recall something as simple as that. "It's not easy getting my company up its feet. I only got this far because of all the effort I put into my career."

Even Carlos shook his head when he heard those words. "Ves, you've got to learn to relax. Even when we studied at Rittersberg, we still partied a lot, remember? What happened to the old Ves?"

"The old, average loser Ves made way for a successful founder and mech designer."

"You'll die an early grave if you keep that up." Cyril warned with a serious tone in his voice. "I get that you're focused in your work. You always achieve great

results when you put your full heart and soul into your mechs. But damnit, you're draining your life!"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"What I mean is that you should find some meaning in your life! Get a hobby, play some games, go on a vacation! Hell, the best way to cure workaholism is to get a girlfriend!"

"Hah! Don't talk about girlfriends with Ves! It's his sore spot." Carlos snorted.

Ves automatically ignored any talk about getting a girlfriend. Instead, he fixated on a particular term his chief technician uttered. "Find the meaning in life, huh?"

For the first time in months, Ves got the sense that he grasped a straw in the dark. The puzzle that forced him to stall his plans to design an original mech became a bit more comprehensible.

His subordinates showed him the light. Even if they joked around a bit, they still showed their concern. Besides mechs, Ves really had nothing else to occupy his life. Small things like playing with Lucky or talking to his relatives over the comm didn't count. He lacked any form of fulfillment besides his work.

To be honest, even if he realized this deficiency, he still felt reluctant about spending time on something else than progressing his career. He truly enjoyed designing mechs and running his company.

"What else can I do, then?"

"A lot of mech designers back in Rittersberg joined a club. There are countless clubs that cater to overworked professionals like you. There's golf clubs, painting clubs, gaming clubs, drama clubs, shuttle racing clubs and more. Whatever hobby you can mention, there's a bunch of men and women

who enjoy doing their hobbies together. Everything is better if you share it with others."

That sounded fine on a major planet like Rittersberg or Bentheim, but a lightly populated planet like Cloudy Curtain probably didn't offer such a sheer variety of clubs.

Besides, Ves didn't even know what kind of hobby he should take.

Fortunately, Chief Cyril had some sage advice for him. "You should look into a creative pursuit rather than a sports activity. Mech design involves both art and science. While it's necessary to be proficient in science and engineering, you also need to flex your creativity. Many mech designers find a hobby for themselves to find inspiration for their next designs. Their ideas don't fall from the sky, you know."

His chief technician's words resonated with the doubts that lurked in his mind. He forgot about this essential truth in mech design.

The creative element distinguished mechs designed by bots from mechs designed by actual humans. Even though the latter might be prone to flaws and inefficiencies, the creative solutions employed by a human designer often led to better results on the battlefield.

The whole industry revolved around this nuance. The sheer variety of mechs being designed every day led to a vibrant mech market where a customer could ask for a mech in any possible shape or form.

While only a small portion of designs achieved commercial success, even the failures added something of value to the industry.

All of this enlightened Ves to the need to enrich his life. Without any other life experiences, how could he know what was best for his original design?

That still begged the question of what kind of hobby he should pick up.

Chapter 232 Fulfillmen

Ves considered designing mechs his life's calling. Since his birth into the Larkinson family, his upbringing constantly centered around mechs. Even after finding out that he'd never be able to interface with a mech, he switched his goals to designing them after a low spell.

Strangely enough, Ves never questioned his singular obsession with mechs. In the Age of Mechs, that shouldn't be a problem for most people, but mech designers had it different.

A mech designer designed mechs. While that sounded like a pleonasm, it actually hid a fundamental truth: a mech designer combined his knowledge and life experiences to shape a unique mechanical war machine into being.

What was a mech designer without much life experience? A bot. A run-of-the-mill cookie-cutter designer who studied from the same mainstream textbooks referenced by countless other designers.

"Is this why apprenticing to a Master and seeking fortune in danger is so important?" Ves hummed to himself. He felt as if he parted the veil behind a essential truth in the field of mech design. "Mech designers that lead monotonous lives will inevitably gravitate towards designing monotonous mechs."

He thought back on all the innovative designs he came across. From the glorious, larger-than-life Caesar Augustus to the gimmicky spear-dashing Hoplite, all of these unique creations possessed a spark of personality that no sane designer could have ever come up with if they holed up in a design studio all day.

Despite their various flaws, the personal touch imbued in their designs turned them into unforgettable classics that lived on in the annals of mech history.

What about the Star Designers, the very best designers in the galaxy? Legends like Apollo, The Polymath and The Armorer all possessed colorful biographies filled with excitement, struggle and tragedy. They persevered through their lows and rode their highs towards the very top of the tallest mountain in the galaxy.

Even then, they still sought even greater heights, always grasping towards the unattainable heavens above.

"That's still too far away from me." Ves shook his head. Who was he kidding? Forget about reaching the heavens, he still hadn't finished his first climb. "Let's find a hobby first."

What did other people do for fun? Ves decided to ask his employees.

He already knew what Carlos did sometimes in his free time. Even back at Rittersberg, he occasionally sneaked to a game center and immersed himself in one of those casual mech simulation games.

Different from Iron Spirit, these games allowed neural peasants like Carlos and Ves to get a taste of actual piloting with minimal demands on their aptitude. They worked by pre-programming all kinds of moves into the virtual mechs. Players could activate them by issuing only a single mental command.

Rather than call it piloting a virtual mech, Ves considered it more like commanding a robot. He always felt very detached when he played such casual games. Even though the games evolved throughout the years to the point where even beginner pilots could pull off moves mastered by aces, it never felt real enough.

"So that's out."

Ves approached Chief Cyril next. He had a very peculiar hobby.

"I make my own clockwork from scratch. I started with the classics using alloys and woods, and after several years of mastery I moved on to incorporating exotics in my works. It's a great hobby for technicians like me because the skills and patience you learn from assembling clocks will greatly help your ability to put a mech together."

Clocks didn't call out to Ves. As far as he was concerned, if he needed to know the time, he could look up the current time from his comm.

With some reluctance, he started asking his technicians on what they did in their free time.

"I like to catch up on the mech duels of the past week with my buddies."

"My father used to be a pro at zero-G rugby. I still play some in the weekends at Freslin's local club."

"I'm part of a bird watcher's association. We're currently lobbying the local government to introduce more species of birds on our planet."

None of these activities appealed to him, but they did give him a sense on what people did for fun. Half of the time they took over the hobbies from their parents. That presented a problem for Ves, as his father was a mech pilot himself.

"What did my dad do in his off time?"

He liked to sit on the porch of their house and watch the murky sky of their home planet. Sometimes he brought out a data pad and read some literature about mundane people facing mundane problems.

Should he sit down and read a book like his father? "I already have to read a lot for my work, so I have no appetite to read anything else for fun."

Ves didn't imagine he'd have so much trouble finding a suitable hobby for him. The more he realized its absence, more he thought he hadn't been making the most out of his life.

He started dabbling in various kinds of arts.

He tried practicing music, but his complete lack of experience with any kind of instrument made it clear he needed to put in thousands of hours to get somewhere. For someone like Ves, that took way too much time.

He switched to painting next, only to get frustrated by his inability to translate his vision onto the canvas. Besides requiring a lot of specialized skills and finesse, Ves also found the process to be tedious.

Figuring he had nothing left to lose, Ves tried out a couple of virtual games on his terminal. He tried his hand at being a battlefield commander ordering around virtual troops, an infantryman fighting against aliens in the trenches and a ship captain who tried to bring his battered ship home.

None of the games held his interest for long. Ves already worked in a sector closely related to war and conflict. Playing the role of a combatant was a nice fantasy, but he'd rather stick with his current job.

He also played some of the sillier popular games. He pretended to be an anthropomorphic pony on fairytale world or engage in a detective game where he tried to solve a fictional city's chicken theft spree.

The lack of depth and the substantial amount of detachment in these games bored Ves to tears. "Anyone who plays these games are either kids or adults looking to escape reality."

So even virtual games couldn't stoke his passion. Ves scratched his head and sighed. "I'm such a quintessential mech head. My entire life is geared towards mechs!"

It was not as if he understood where others got their enjoyment from their hobbies. They simply didn't resonate to Ves. His body and mind had been wired in a different way to most people, and it received a further transformation from his adventure at Groening IV.

"I've got alien genes in my body. Maybe that's got to do with my lethargy."

He couldn't deny that Ves still didn't understand his body. Even though he regularly visited a specialist from Sanyal-Ablin, he still felt a bit unsettled by the changes wrought by the additional organs in his body.

His Jutland organ still continued to circulate an invisible energy loop in his body. While his treatments helped subside some of the organ's strange effects, Ves always considered it with a wary eye.

For this reason, Ves declined to participate in any sports. His posthuman body gave him an unnatural advantage in this area. Many sports clubs automatically bar their gates towards any genetic deviants like him. They wanted to maintain an even playing field for the most numerous species of mankind.

"I can't blame them for doing so. They'll unleash a race towards hybridization if they allow people who muck up their genetics with alien traits in their ranks."

Ves considered taking a hobby closer to his calling, such as constructing functional scale miniatures or designing so-called 'fantasy mechs'.

The latter consisted of designing mechs using technology or principles beyond humanity's reach. In many cases, this referred to magic.

Several popular virtual games took place in a low-tech fantasy environment. The mechs that sometimes appeared in these settings ran on either pure magic or a combination of magic and technology. They provided an alternative to those who wanted to play with mechs but didn't wish to simulate reality so closely.

He briefly considered diving into this world, but begged it off after a while. "If I'm going to escape from my work, I better not be doing the same thing."

By now, even his subordinates grew exasperated by his ineptness at finding a distraction. Carlos tutted at him with a tired expression. "For heaven's sake, Ves, just get off your butt and go take a walk or something. There's plenty of things to do in downtown Freslin."

"I'm kind of under constant threat right now. My security guards advised me against taking casual walks outside. Who knows how many greedy criminals are waiting to kidnap me outside."

The LMC made a fortune out of its recent sales. No one could hide that fact, especially since dozens of news portals published articles about his products. The more money he accumulated, the more scrutiny he attracted.

Few of those gazes had the best intentions in mind.

Frankly, Ves started to feel that his current security arrangements could use some adjustment. Melkor and Raella helped by patrolling with their mechs, but Ves could hardly demand they stay inside their mechs for an entire day.

Work constantly tempted him back, but he resisted. "The workshop doesn't need me right now."

At the moment, the LMC only produced the silver label Mark II's. That didn't mean the design posed no challenges, but with Carlos on hand, his employees should be able to handle any problems themselves.

The new workplace culture started to show its effects. Under a combination of positive reinforcement and leading by example, Chief Cyril managed to instill the mech technicians with a sense of initiative. They loosened up and started giving out suggestions on how to improve particular processes.

Even if their ideas turned out to be brain-dead stupid, at least they made an effort. Ves had no wish to turn his company into a soulless profit-driven enterprise where its workers were treated like cogs in a machine. Carlos often complained about treated like dirt in his previous job as a quality control inspector at a major mech manufacturing plant.

Ves turned back to his quest to find a hobby. He even asked Lucky if he had any suggestions on what to do. The mechanical cat let out a puzzling meow before turning back to munching on a chunk of minerals, tail swishing lazily all the while.

"Okay then. Enjoy your meal."

Should he simply give up on his search or find a girlfriend to spend his time with? Ves quickly ruled out these options.

"Maybe I should go on a vacation."

He considered spending time on a retreat not too far away from home. While Ves liked to experience a change in scenery, he didn't wish to stay aboard a ship for weeks at a time. He couldn't afford to take too much time out of work.

The idea stood out as a great way to experience something new without making a substantial commitment to his time. With the speed of his Barracuda, he could easily reach most star systems within Bentheim's sphere of influence in a couple of days.

Ves browsed through a selection of nearby star systems and planets. Every settled planet in the Republic offered something unique to tourists. Even a boring place like Cloudy Curtain turned into a refuge for those that lived on worlds with very strong suns.

He paused flicking through the destinations when he came across an aquatic planet called Moira's Paradise. Water covered the entire globe except for a couple of artificial islands. Its settlers built many cities underwater.

While the planet originally offered very little in the way of aquatic flora and fauna, its enterprising citizens imported many remarkable alien wildlife into its ecosystem. They even managed to get their hands on a couple of exotic creatures that could only be found in the galactic heartland or the galactic center.

All of them deserved a closer look.

Chapter 233 Moiras Paradise

Once Ves set his mind on his destination, he moved quickly. He browsed the galactic net for holiday options and selected a vacation package catered to the rich.

Ves booked a ticket aboard an advanced aquatic cruise ship that provided guided tours around Moira's Paradise. He paid 300,000 credits for the lowest-level package, which provided him with a basic cabin that nevertheless exceeded the standard of any 5-star hotel on Cloudy Curtain.

The tier above that offered him a roomier berth, a higher priority on visiting the various sights and premium service aboard the cruise ship. That sounded nice and all, but anyone who wanted to take advantage of these luxuries had to cough up 5 million credits a pop.

"That's not even considering the upper tiers."

Moira's Paradise attracted a decent amount of tourists from the neighboring states. The ocean planet worked hard to diversify its ecosystem to the point where it became a regional attraction. It offered a handful of unique exotic creatures that couldn't be found elsewhere in the Komodo Star Sector.

"There's also the aquatic mechs to consider. I've never been exposed to that scene."

An entire subculture developed around aquatic mechs. Any settled planet with oceans of water or other liquids required a whole different paradigm if you

wanted to invade or defend it. Any regular mechs that fell into a boundless ocean quickly sank to the bottom until the increasing pressure crushed it like a can.

Aquatic mechs had to comply with two essential demands. First, it had to be able to handle the crushing pressure. Second, it had to be waterproof. This led to the adoption heavily armored fish or mermen-shaped mechs propelled by powerful jets as the norm in aquatic combat.

Weight formed less of a concern than elsewhere, allowing aquatic mech designers to stuff their mechs full of goodies that would have slowed a mech on land to a crawl.

In addition, aquatic warfare often occurred within knife-fighting range. The only viable form of long-range combat consisted of flinging torpedoes at each other. At close ranges, railguns, harpoons and ballistic rifles became viable, but not ideal. In third-rate states, melee combat dominated the oceans.

Having booked his ticket, Ves packed up his bags and brought along Lucky and Raella for the ride. When she heard he wanted to take her along for the ride, she looked a little put off.

"It's great that you're finally bringing me away from this boring as hell planet, but why aren't you going somewhere exciting? Moira's Paradise is a tourist trap! Hardly anything happens over there! Even the BLM doesn't bother with the place."

"It's either you or Melkor, and he's already had his turn. Besides, don't you want to see the aquatic mechs up close?"

"Who cares about those fish mechs? Besides, my Vektrix is absolutely useless without solid beneath her feet. I won't be of any use to you."

"Just come with me. I need someone I trust at my side."

With some reluctance, Raella eventually relented. She exacted a promise from Ves to bring her along if he went on another adventure. Ves privately thought she might have to wait for years, as he didn't plan to risk his life anytime soon.

They boarded the Barracuda and made their way to Moira's Paradise on a direct FTL transition. As a binary star system, it possessed a powerful pair of suns that made it relatively easy for the Barracuda to hone in on its coordinates. The corvette traversed the distance in a matter of days before reaching the edge of the star system.

Another day went past as they corvette made its way to the inner system and descended onto one of the few artificial islands dotting the surface of Moira's Paradise. They made it well in time before their cruise ship debarked from the island's port.

The massive submersible cruise ship looked like a starship with a streamlined shape. When Ves first caught sight of the Nautilus of the Deep, he found its scale to be as impressive as the luxury passenger ships plying the stars.

Ves, Raella and Lucky joined an orderly line of well-dressed passengers before the ramp. Considering the ticket price, none of the people possessed average backgrounds. The line moved quickly as an army of attendants processed their tickets and checked over their belongings.

Raella had to leave her pistol and her knife behind. The crew of the Nautilus took responsibility for their security for the most part, though Ves heard of tales where passengers resorted to fists.

"Mr. Larkinson?" A uniformed attendant called once he boarded the ship. "My name is Georgina Black. I'll be your first point of contact for your stay aboard the Nautilus of the Deep. If you have any concerns or requests, feel free to contact me in person or through my comm!"

They exchanged comm contacts before Georgina led him to his cabin in the lower decks. For 300,000 credits, the room he appeared sufficiently lavish. It's blue-gold embellishments added a deep-sea ambiance to the place. Ves and Raella handed their floating coffer to the cabin bots, which automatically sorted out their clothes and other belongings.

"The Nautilus will depart in two hours. Please make your way to the middle observation deck at that time. We'll be commencing the first part of our tour at that time."

After mentioning a few other points of notice, Georgina left the guests to their devices. Raella already started to yawn. "It's dull in here. Let's visit the shopping boulevard!"

The pair proceeded to enter the shopping boulevard set in the upper decks of the Nautilus. A transparent, retractable dome allowed strong sunlight to fall upon the boulevard. Plenty of guests have already set their sights on the luxury products in the displays. Raella pretty much raced towards the clothing stores.

Meanwhile, Ves strolled through the electronics and gadget stores. All kinds of conveniences could be bought for a pretty sum. A couple of products had even been imported from the Coalition, such as comm modules that sold for 500,000 credits.

The boulevards offered plenty of space for those who didn't feel inclined to spend so much money. Kids ran around the open park areas while older boys tried to woo the girls they came across. Couples sat together admiring the statues and other artwork that enlivened the interior.

Ves picked up a variety of accents from their conversations. He even caught a few Coalition speech patterns, most notably from the Carnegie Group. They possessed the most open culture within the Friday Coalition. It made sense

that the more adventurous among them spent their holidays abroad where their purchasing power turned them into royals.

"What would someone like Oleg think when he visits the Republic?"

He'd probably be astounded by the lack of development of his state. The Bright Republic offered few prospects to elites like him. He deserved to perform on a greater stage.

Ves milled around for a while but refrained from purchasing anything. Even if his company's accounts strained with cash, the money should be spent on investments rather than useless consumer goods.

Besides, sitting in the park watching people go about their lives relaxed him in a soothing way. Here, he could let down his worries and forget about the concerns that weighed him down.

For the next ten days, Ves resolved to lay down his job as a mech designer and enjoy the sights like a normal tourist. Already he could feel the benefits of his decision to spend his time on Moira's Paradise. The harmonious environment cleansed his mind and soothed away the stresses that had been accumulating without his notice.

A tranquil mood settled in as Ves waited until Raella returned with a few bags of clothes. Ves had provided her with a generous allowance this time. After handing the bags off to a service bot that brought them back to their cabin, the pair followed the directions towards the middle observation deck.

The Nautilus featured an extendable hump at the upper part of her hull that provided a commanding view of the artificial island and the boundless ocean. Ves and Raella arrived in time and met up with Georgina, who gathered up around thirty other passengers.

"Alright, everyone is here!" The attendant clapped. "Welcome aboard the Nautilus of the Deep. As the most premier cruise ship on Moira's Paradise,

the Nautilus offers the highest level of comfort and protection to our guests. Again, if you have any concerns, please feel free to inform me. Now, without further ado, let us set off!"

A low shudder ran throughout the massive ship. The Nautilus groaned before slowly edging away from her berth at the island's port. With deceptive slowness, the massive cruise ship flung herself forward and built up a considerable amount of speed and momentum.

As the island began to recede, a handful of aquatic mechs swam around the Nautilus. Their powerful jet engines easily kept up with the cruise ship's massive starship-sized propulsion.

After the excitement died down, Georgina detailed their schedule for the next ten days. "The Nautilus will be bringing you along some of the best sights our planet has to offer. In the first leg of our journey, we'll be submerging ourselves into the Vermillion Sea. You'll be able to see some of our many exotic creatures up close and learn why they are treasured by the galaxy!"

A projection came into being that showed off some of these alien creatures. None of them appeared monstrous, which was likely a deliberate decision by the rulers of Moira's Paradise. No need to scare the kids away.

"Next, we'll be visiting Fort MacLellan, a neutral, sovereign bulwark built to resist an alien invasion. Built and maintained by the MTA, this mobile, floating fortress features many advancements prevalent in the center of the galaxy. Much of its areas remains off-limits, but they offer limited access to vetted visitors. Not to worry, anyone who's currently aboard our ship is already cleared."

The projection showed an intimidating mass of construction the size of downtown Freslin. It was shaped like an oval and moved through the water

with unknown means. Squads of aquatic mechs emerged from various launching points around the floating fortress.

Its smooth, thick hull gave the illusion that MacLellan functioned like a turtle. Ves wasn't fooled. Even as he recognized the precious exotic alloys used in its construction, he also spotted the outlines of giant, retractable hatches that undoubtedly covered enormous weapon emplacements.

"Fort MacLellan also offers distinguished guests a tour of their first-class aquatic mechs. VIPs and those who pay a fee are granted greater privileges in this tour. Please check the details in the virtual guide that's been sent to your comm."

First-class mechs was an informal term that people used to refer to mechs built to the standards of a first-rate superstate. The vast majority of the mechs that Ves encountered in the Republic consisted of only third-class mechs, while the Coalition had it better with their second-class mechs.

In truth, the designs utilized by Fort MacLellan consisted of bottom-tier first-class mechs. If any mech pilot showed up to a duel with a bottom-tier mech, they'd be laughed away before they get a chance to fight.

Still, a pauper mech from a first-rate state turned into a kingly steed the moment it entered the galactic rim. Even Ves looked forward to seeing first-class mechs in the flesh.

"After experiencing the majesty of the MTA, we'll be descending to the deepest depths of the Vermillion Sea and arrive at Cava City, the entertainment capital of Moira's Paradise. Cava city offers great opportunities for art enthusiasts in its sector-renowned museums. Fancy some shows from Cava City's renowned theaters? Refer to the virtual guide and let us book your tickets on your behalf."

Cava City offered much more than museum and plays. The place had become notorious for its freewheeling gambling and competitive aquatic mech scene. While Bentheim held the crown for landbound and aerial mechs, Moira's Paradise was a mecca for amphibian and aquatic mechs.

Chapter 234 Space Whales

The Nautilus submerged after the guides finished their introductions. Ves noticed that the crew arranged different guides to different groups. Some preferred bots while others preferred no guide at all. The VIPs even had a full staff catering to their every needs.

As for Ves, he preferred staying in a group. The surrounding people already started introducing themselves as they waited for the Nautilus to reach the required depths in the Vermillion Sea.

Ves introduced himself as an independent mech designer, which didn't raise a lot of eyebrows. There were bankers, socialites, shipping magnates and scientists among the crowd, and all of them occupied leadership positions of some capacity.

Only a quarter of the tourists dealt directly with the mech industry. Ves found himself drawn to a conversation with a middle-aged shipping magnate named Eddie Zhang.

"So you are predicting an abrupt collapse and rise of prices in exotics? How does that work?" Ves asked with evident confusion.

"Mr. Larkinson, you speak of exotic minerals as if they are all the same. That's a gross oversimplification of the market. The Komodo Star Sector is relatively barren in exotics in both quantity and variety. It's the latter that's been causing anxieties for us. Our neighboring Star Sectors are increasingly tightening the flow of exotics that's been exported from the galactic heartland."

"Are they growing hostile to us?"

Eddie shook his head. "Nothing as nefarious as that. The Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal Star Sectors have their own internal tension to deal with, so they are basically intercepting any shipments of exotics before they reach our sector. We're the last kid in a very long line of hungry children, and the cafeteria only has so much bread to pass around."

Ves found it ironic that a wealthy man like him with a net worth in the billions used such an allegory.

"But the Komodo Star Sector still produces its own fair share of exotics, right?"

"Yes, and the quantity is sufficient to meet the needs of the domestic industry, but certain types of minerals are too hard to come by. The Bright Republic doesn't make too much use of these expensive imported exotics, but the Coalition and the Hexarchy will be badly affected when they find they can't produce their high-quality second-class mechs in the desired quantities. Once that happens, the knock-on effects will resonate throughout the sector."

"I see now." Ves could also think through the consequences. "Even though the second-class mechs require imported exotics to produce, they also take up a large share of locally sourced exotics. Once the mech manufacturers find themselves bottlenecked by decreasing imports, the local exotic resource market will end up in a glut of unsold exotics."

That could be good and bad for the mech industry in the Republic. Certainly, Ves didn't think it would be that simple and that the LMC would enjoy a reprieve from the rising cost of raw materials.

All of these worries threatened to burden his holiday, so Ves avoided the topic of mechs. As the Nautilus started diving past various colonies of remarkable marine life, the guides started to explain their origin and their notable traits.

"The spirellian spike fish is a notable species of carnivorous fish unique to the Komodo Star Sector. The spikes extending out of their bodies are not only incredibly tough, but they also enable the fishes to communicate with each other through extradimensional means. Larger schools of spike fishes are able to pool their power together, to the point where it has been proven that they have been communicating with another school of fish several light-years away."

That required a school of over a million spike fishes, something that the spike fishes on Moira's Paradise couldn't sustain. It sure sounded impressive nonetheless. Seeing the spirellian spike fishes swim in unison in such a coordinated fashion hammered home the beauty of nature.

Throughout the next two days, the Nautilus visited various reefs, volcanic vents and trenches. Each time, the passengers gazed wondrously at the exotic marine life making their homes there.

One of the most notable exotic species consisted of fluorescent amoeba. They actively emitted a rainbow of colored light. These shapeless blob-like creatures not only looked resplendent in the dark, but also hid their thorns very deeply.

"The suryeen amoebae are notable for being one of the few species in the galaxy to have weaponized radioactivity. If they are provoked in any fashion, they will burn away most of their energy to flash an intense burst of radioactive light that will fatally affect their attackers. Most often, the amoeba in question will die, but others of its kind will feed on the remains and reproduce."

Just when Ves thought he'd experienced enough exotic species, the aeliotonoc whales took him aback.

"One of our most valuable exospecies consists of the aeliotonoc whales. These whale-shaped, eight-limbed creatures are actually genetic off-shoots of an the extinct sentient alien species called the Aylos. If you remember your history lessons, in their early expansion into the galaxy, the Terrans encountered the Aylos. While they were rather slow-witted, these sentient space whales developed a form of FTL that was leagues better than what humanity cobbled together on their own."

The Terrans quickly found out that the Aylos tended to be pacifists, so they outright stole their FTL technology before waging war on them. Utilizing their new ships to their full advantage, they took the Aylos off-guard and wiped them out to the last whale.

Communication between the two species had always been rough, but near the end of this genocide, humanity managed to develop some form of communication with the Aylos. At their final moment, the space whales made a desperate plea for their species to live on, rather than be wiped out from existence.

Since humanity already occupied a commanding position, they assented to the request. Through extensive genetic manipulation, they developed the aeliotonoc whales from the carcass of the once-majestic Aylos species.

Humanity saw it as a final humiliation for a species they vanquished, but the Aylos species considered it a continuation of their lineage.

Nowadays, historians considered the war against the Aylos to be one of humanity's most formative steps to dominating the galaxy. The anti-alien extremists in the Terran government increased their grip on power and began to pursue a policy of rapid expansion and aggression.

This subsequently led to humanity's greater expansion in their origin star sector. Even though they bumped into trouble when they bumped into a

regional alien superpower, their boundless ferocity gave them a fighting chance.

What startled Ves about the aeliotonoc whales was not their history, but their mental energy. As the Nautilus gently traversed along a colony of playful whales, his sixth sense started pinging with increased intensity.

Each time a whale did something notable, his sixth sense spiked. The strange sensation totally rooted Ves in place. "How are these creatures so strong?"

Every whale possessed an immense mental strength that Ves could hardly believe it at first. Yet despite the power locked in their bodies, the signals they put out was a mass of chaotic noise that easily blended into the background.

"They've got all that strength, but they don't know how to use it."

Ves never really paid too much attention to the history of mankind's early ascent into space. The Aylos species only formed a footnote in their long and contentious rise to the stars. If humanity hadn't stolen their FTL technology and adapted it for their needs, the space whales would have been forgotten by all but the most obscure historians.

Now, he took a second look at their history. What made these whales so remarkable that they needed so much mental strength? How strong were the original Aylos, and how did they utilize their powers?

He approached Georgina when she finished her initial explanation. "Can you tell me more about the aeliotonoc whales?"

"Certainly, Mr. Larkinson. Do you wish to know anything specific?"

"What are the uses of the whales?" He asked.

Every exotic species they encountered offered something useful to the planet. For example, Moira's Paradise cultivated the spirellian spike fishes for their

spikes to serve as substitute materials in the construction of quantum entanglement nodes.

"Besides serving as a monument to mankind's defeat of the Aylos, the aeliotonoc whales are harvested as ingredients for high-value psychotropic drugs. Many inexplicable mental conditions can be treated with these drugs."

Georgina didn't know much more about the drugs because it touched upon the core business of the transgalactic drug manufacturers.

She knew more about the empathic nature of the aeliotonoc whales. As a near-sentient aquatic exospecies, the creatures demonstrated a remarkable capacity to bond with any humans they came across.

All of this hinted that the whales possessed exceptional minds. Ves wished to get closer to the creatures, but Moira's Paradise strictly prohibited contact with the aeliotonoc whales except for therapeutic purposes. The Nautilus only lingered for half an hour before its time was up.

The cruise ship made its way deeper into the depths of the Vermillion Sea. Fort MacLellan ordinary drifted in the deepest trenches of the planet's oceans.

"The Nautilus will be arriving at Fort MacLellan tomorrow morning." Georgina explained. "Make sure to set your alarms and wake up early if you want to step foot inside the fortress. The MTA maintains a strict schedule and any latecomers will be refused at the gates if they arrive one second too late."

"Why is the floating fortress drifting so deep? Won't the pressure put a lot of stress on its shell?" A kid asked.

Their tour guide smiled along with most of the adults. Almost everyone knew the answer. "That's a good question! Think about what forts are supposed to do. Can you tell me why they have such thick and strong exteriors?"

"So that they can bounce off attacks!"

"Good! Now think about a fort in water and compare it to a fort in space. The latter is surrounded by vacuum, which is another word for empty space. If someone fires gun at the fort, the vacuum will do almost nothing to prevent it from reaching the fort. Now compare that to Fort MacLellan, which is many kilometers underwater. If you fire a gun from the surface of the ocean, it will only reach a short distance before the projectile loses power."

"Oh, so all of this water is like another form of armor."

"That's right! The deeper you go, the more stuff you put between the fort and any attacks from space. In fact, aquatic planets are often considered fortress planets for their ability to hold off against a siege. That's also the reason why the MTA decided to build Fort MacLellan here."

A tourist with a military background added his own insights to the topic.

"Floating fortresses are superior to underground fortresses because they are able to move around. The water already renders most forms of weapons of mass destruction ineffective. Lasers fired from battleships in orbit will get refracted while projectiles lose their momentum. Anything else that gets through will often lose their mark as the fortress has already drifted away."

The floating fortresses also used other means to obscure their presence from wide-area scans. By hiding within the depths of the oceans, these fortresses forced invaders to allocate a lot of resources in combing the waters for their trails.

Such a game of cat and mouse could drag on for years or even decades, making the invaders very miserable. In comparison, conventional underground fortresses were often found within weeks. Their inability to move made their presence obvious once the invaders brought powerful enough scanners.

"So the fort will only be useful if aliens invade our state?"

"Yes. Floating fortresses like Fort MacLellan takes a lot of resources to maintain. The Republic isn't able to build one that is good enough to hide against conventional scanners."

After answering a couple of other questions, Georgina left and the tour group dispersed. Just as Ves wondered if he should look up the space whales on the galactic net, Raella grabbed his arm and dragged him elsewhere.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"I just found out that they're holding a concert in one of the auditoriums. Do you know who's performing? It's Stellar Fantasy, yo! I can't miss seeing them up close!"

And so Ves spent the rest of the day attending a concert.

Chapter 235 Disparity

The Nautilus of the Deep made her way towards the depths of Moira's Paradise. In this age, humans preferred to live above blue skies and breathe fresh air, but some made do without them. On aquatic planets, the vast majority of the population lived underneath massive domes at the bottom of the oceans.

Fort MacLellan differed from those static settlements by possessing both stealth and mobility along with a very thick shell. Combined, these traits turned the floating citadel into one of the best protected bulwarks against external threats.

As the Nautilus arrived at the right coordinates, a handful of fast marine shuttles descended onto the cruise ship. Heavily armed security officers in MTA colors scoured over the entire ship from top to bottom. Even Ves and Raella had to be subjected to a couple of scans.

The pair had been cleared to enter Fort MacLellan, but Lucky had to be left behind.

"Our apologies, Mr. Larkinson, but our scans can't penetrate your mechanical companion. For safety reasons, it's best to leave your pet behind."

Ves acquiesced to the demand, especially since the Mech Trade Association guaranteed his security aboard the fort. Besides, if the MTA turned on him for any reason, he doubted Lucky could make a difference. Against the vast might of one of the two most powerful human organizations in the galaxy, nobody could afford to go against their will.

When the fort came into view of the ship, everyone on the observation decks held their voices. The floating fortress appeared as a giant metallic egg with many segmented surface plates, all of which could be retracted to reveal weapon hardpoints or hangar entrances.

At its current state, the fort hid its fangs, but its gigantic size loomed like a constant threat. An estimated fifty-thousand men and women manned the fort, enough to lockdown the entire planet if it stockpiled enough supplies.

Once the Nautilus had been checked, the MTA started shuttling tourists over to the dormant egg. A small hatch opened up to allow the marine shuttles to enter the belly of the beast. A powerful energy screen kept the water at bay. Despite the immense pressure at this depth, the energy screen never flickered from the stress.

Georgina gathered her tour group once the passengers exited the shuttles. She led them through a series of guarded checkpoints through depressing grey corridors.

The entire interior appeared utilitarian to the extreme. Ves spotted hardly any artwork or decorations that could cheer up the people manning the fort. Every service member they passed by maintained dour expressions that spoke of complete dedication to the cause.

"Even the Mech Corps isn't as serious as these dummies." Raella carelessly remarked, which earned him a few glares from the other guests.

It was never a good idea to disrespect the MTA, especially in the middle of one of their strongholds.

"You may be wondering why the service members are unusually focused on their tasks." Georgina said when the atmosphere turned tense. "That is because they are exiled from the galactic center and have been forced to take up a post in the galactic rim. Essentially, they are not here by choice."

"So is everyone here a conscript? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not everyone aboard the MacLellan is a conscript. Half are volunteers sourced from across the Komodo Star Sector. Once they signed up with the MTA, they formally renounced their citizenship to their former states and have become a true galactic citizen. Even if they don't look like it, they all hold very strong fealty to the MTA."

As an organization renowned across the galaxy, the MTA knew how to inspire loyalty in its people. Much of what actually happened inside its halls remained classified, but everyone knew that service members almost never turned against the organization.

Some conspiracy theorists even thought that the MTA injected nanites in their members to influence their thoughts. Since such an act violated a fundamental taboo enforced by the very same organization, no one entertained such ideas.

An MTA public relations officer met with Georgina at the end of a long series of corridors. Unlike most service members, the officer actually smiled.

"Welcome aboard Fort MacLellan! For the next two days, I will be guiding you around the fort. Our first destination is just up ahead. Follow me."

They followed the guide to a massive chamber that hosted a giant cannon barrel the size of a corvette. The sheer size of the thing underscored how powerful the fort could be if it ever bared its fangs.

The PR officer began his speech. "Fort MacLellan hosts many advanced types of weapons, from pulse cannons to antimatter nukes. While I can't speak about most of those armament, sometimes we find the simplest solution the best solution. This big boy here is a plain old gauss cannon that's been scaled to fit our needs. Just like any weapon that works on electromagnetism, it propels a heavy alloy slug forward at unimaginable speeds. At the right depth, we can even crack a battlecruiser in half."

Everyone got to enter the control room and witness simulations of the super-sized gauss cannon at work. A childish glee took over the guests as they pretended to hurl accelerated slugs at various simulated targets, all projected with an unprecedented level of realism.

After everyone got a round with the cannon, the PR officer brought them along some other places.

They dropped by the mess hall to experience first-class food.

They visited one of the armories, where they got to hold some very advanced infantry weapons. Tourists who held weapon proficiencies even got to fire them in the practice range. Ves especially found the pulse rifles intriguing.

Pulse weapons served as the standard weapon in the galactic center for its ability to deal both kinetic and thermal damage at the same time. As long as weapon developers paired the technology with sufficiently powerful energy cells and heatsinks, a pulse weapon vastly outlasted conventional ballistic weaponry.

"I'm not a fan of rifles, but this rifle is really awesome!" Raella whooped with enthusiasm as she fired the rifle until it reached its heat capacity. A block of

alloy at the range turned into a broken, half-molten mess. "I only drained ten percent of its batteries!"

A lot of other people took note of this, prompting the PR officer to speak up. "Human technology has made enormous strides into increasing the density of our energy cells. In truth, the rifles you are holding are all equipped with the lowest tier of energy cells. It's unfortunate that our heatsink technology hasn't caught up with our needs. Normally, we allow the rifles to vent the heat or eject the sink and replace it with a cold one."

The officer demonstrated the procedure. The spent heatsink came out red hot, to the point of distorting the air around it. If the officer didn't wear a specialized glove, he would have burned his hands down to the bone.

"The more you move to the center of the galaxy, the less restrictions we face in terms of power supply. A cutting-edge mech of the New Rubarth Empire can output enough energy to power a capital ship."

That meant at minimum a battlecruiser, a capital ship crewed by thousands. Battlecruisers possessed enough armaments to wipe out every form of life on a planet such as Bentheim or Rittersberg. The notion that all of that power could be compressed in a single mech completely astounded Ves.

"Does MacLellan have one of those mechs?"

"Sadly, no." The officer smiled as he shook his head. "Such mechs are extremely demanding in their fabrication and maintenance requirements. It would cost as much as the GDP of the Bright Republic to maintain a cutting-edge mech for a single year."

Again, the tourists learned how little the Komodo Star Sector mattered in the greater scheme of things.

"While we don't have a cutting-edge mech to show off, we do have plenty of excellent first-class mechs to offer."

They moved on to one of the many mech stables of Fort MacLellan. Even Ves looked forward to this part, as he had never come across an aquatic mech in his life.

Everyone expressed their awe once they came across the mechs. Every mech looked like giant metallic fish. Only a couple of mechs adopted humanoid traits in their design.

"Much like the aquatic mechs of the Bright Republic, our mech pilots favor hydrodynamic shapes over the increased flexibility of a humanoid aquatic mech design."

"Why don't aquatic mech pilots want arms?"

"Oh, it's not that they hate arms, but they bring more cons than pros when you fight underwater. In practice, the speeds at which aquatic mech combat occurs makes it difficult for a humanoid mech to swing its weapon. Mechs have to fight against the water before they can deal any damage to their opponents."

Humanoid mechs also had a tendency to lose grip on their weapons at higher speeds. They had to lock their weapons to the frame through various means if the mech had to crank up their jet engines. Mech designers might as well adopt a fish-shaped design and embed the weapons along the frame in fixed hardpoints.

"That's not to say that humanoid aquatic mechs serve no use." The man quickly added. "Mechs face less pressure the closer they are to the surface of the ocean. Sometimes, aquatic mechs have to fight against enemies that are on the surface or in the air. Arms provide more flexibility than rigid hardpoints in this case."

They got to visit both varieties of mechs. The first design consisted of a classic merman mech. It possessed a humanoid torso and a fish-like lower

body. Its complicated arrangement of scales and flexible internal frame made the lower body as responsive as the body of a snake. It allowed the mech to maneuver through the water with a high degree of control.

With a mech designer's eye, Ves noted that the mech had been fabricated in an absolutely perfect state. Besides some evidence of routine wear and tear, the mech appeared flawless. Other copies of the same model exhibited the same traits.

"How are these mechs produced?" He asked, unable to contain his curiosity. "They don't look like they've been fabricated and assembled with ordinary means."

"That's because we don't fabricate the mechs, we materialize them." The PR officer smiled with pride. "Each design is reproduced from atom to atom with a materializer. You'd have to bring up a lab-grade scanner to notice any discrepancies from the mech and its original design."

"How fast is this process?"

"Oh, it's fairly fast. The best equipment can materialize a mech in less than an hour. Materialization is our most advanced means of producing mechs. Still, it will likely take several hundred years for the technology to proliferate to this corner of the galaxy, as materializers demand a lot of power to run."

While the technology sounded impressive, Ves found the results to be less than stellar. The mechs appeared completely dead to his senses. Even when he strained his Sixth Sense, he encountered nothing but silence.

Even the sloppiest fabricated mech carried some remains from the people who worked on the machine. Ves had never encountered a mech that felt more dead than these aquatic mechs.

A normal mech fabricated by his competitors at least showed some potential for life. Even if their X-Factor ended up in a stillborn state, it still left some remnants that possessed a chance to be revived.

A mech that had been materialized lacked this possibility. The influence of any single human being had been diminished to the point where he had to activate a single command on a materializer. Once he lifted his finger, the materializer did the rest of the work, reproducing the design from atom to atom with precision that only machines could accomplish.

"The future of manufacturing technology is becoming increasingly more soulless." Ves lamented quietly.

The pursuit of speed, efficiency and precision had no limits. Human beings imposed many constraints on these goals, as their wobbly limbs, slow reaction speeds and questionable judgement made it difficult to ensure a perfect production run.

Personal craftsmanship became increasingly more irrelevant in the face of better technology. Ves took a final look at the merman mech and turned away. He completely lost his appetite for MacLellan's mechs.

Chapter 236 Imagination

Beyond the childlike fascination of witnessing humanity latest toys at work, Ves thought the visit to Fort MacLellan served another purpose. There was no reason for the MTA to show off its might to the well-heeled tourists of the Nautilus than to put them in their place.

For Ves, the visit reminded him that the states in the Komodo Star Sector meant nothing to the MTA. As far as they were concerned, the conflicts between the states resembled toddlers fighting over a favored toy.

Still, even the MTA and CFA had their limits. Even though they made a lot of strides in binding the fractured human states together, they never attempted to unite all of humanity into a single galactic empire.

History had shown that such a cause often ended with disaster. Nowadays, the galaxy was big enough to accommodate all kinds of rulers and states. The existences of countless kingdoms, republics, federations, alliances and more attested to the diversity of their race.

After touring a couple more aquatic mechs and other curiosities, the tourists shuttled back to the Nautilus. The final leg of the holiday consisted of a three-long visit to Cava City, the party capital of Moira's Paradise.

The tour organizers offered a lot of options for the passengers to choose. Some preferred to visit the city's seedy gambling dens while others preferred the city's fantastic art scene.

Raella wanted to attend a high-profile aquatic mech duel tournament. Ves on the other hand wanted to find some inspiration by paying a visit to the city's many museums.

"Cava City isn't safe. We shouldn't split up."

"Oh, come on Ves, why do you have to visit those boring museums? If you want to admire some artwork, why don't you look them up from your terminal?"

"A projection is no substitute for the real thing."

"That's what artsy design folk like you would say. To me, it makes no difference!"

They argued a bit but Ves had the upper hand since he paid all the bills. Ves only relented a bit by promising to spend one day at the arena before going off to the museums and art galleries.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're wasting your time." Raella remarked with a touch of spite in her tone.

"Culture is never a waste of time." Ves replied as he registered their plans to the tour operators. They'd receive their priority tickets within the hour. "It takes a lot of creativity to come up with a good design. They don't fall off the sky like apples from a tree."

A mech designer had to come up with something creative in order to make a splash in the market. Many of his rivals forgot about this rule and published generic designs that competed in the same saturated market segments. They'd never be able to beat the mainstream models that have gone through countless rounds of optimization.

As the Nautilus traversed along the bottom of the ocean, Ves considered whether he'd benefit from spending his DP. He eyed his Status and his stagnant Attributes and considered whether to invest in candies that upgraded his Creativity.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 112,530

Attributes

Strength: 1.3

Dexterity: 0.8

Endurance: 1.9

Intelligence: 1.8

Creativity: 1

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

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

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

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

[Mathematics]: Journeyman

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

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression II]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

[Physics]: Journeyman - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II]

[Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization III]

[Melee Weapon Optimization II]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice

[Signals and Communications]: Apprentice

Abilities

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

Evaluation: A post-human mech designer with a random collection of Skills.

Over the months, his physique had stabilized at their current levels. With an endurance of 1.9, his body performed close to the genetic limit of the human race. His strength had also decreased by a significant margin.

For now, Ves ignored his physical Attributes and focused on his mental ones.

"There should be a reason why the System includes Creativity in its Status page."

The industry often repeated the phrase that designing mechs was both an art and a science. Now that Ves faced the prospect of designing his first original mech, he became aware of the importance of those words.

"It's never wrong to invest in my mind.

With a stockpile of over 100,000 DP, Ves had the points to spare. He decided to upgrade his Creativity first. Right now, Ves merely wished to improve his capability to appreciate art.

Ves checked whether his Privacy Shield still worked before purchasing a bunch of candies. "Come on, System, give me the candies!"

[Creativity Attribute Candy]: 1,000 Design Points

[Creativity Attribute Candy]: 1,100 Design Points

[Creativity Attribute Candy]: 1,200 Design Points

[Creativity Attribute Candy]: 1,300 Design Points

[Creativity Attribute Candy]: 1,400 Design Points

[Creativity Attribute Candy]: 1,500 Design Points

[Creativity Attribute Candy]: 1,600 Design Points

[Creativity Attribute Candy]: 1,700 Design Points

[Creativity Attribute Candy]: 1,800 Design Points

The candies materialized before him. Ves had never figured out how the System did that, but now that he learned about materialization, he started to foster some suspicions. He looked at his form-fitting comm resting on his wrist, but no matter how much he stared at it, he couldn't believe it actually packed such a wondrous piece of technology.

Since the System maintained its silence, Ves simply shrugged and started swallowing the candies one after another.

The candies worked their magic in a gentle fashion. Ves found it hard to describe the transformation in his mind. It was as if a gentle breeze blew into his mindscape. Wherever it passed, flowers bloomed and animals grew.

The difference between a Creativity score of 1.0 and 1.9 quickly became apparent. His mind bloomed with possibilities. Ves found it difficult to hold his focus as his senses ceaselessly stimulated his imagination.

Things ceased to become things.

They became something more.

For example, when Ves looked at a half-empty glass of water sitting on the table, his mind started to go off a tangent about its origins. The glass possessed an exquisite design, but Ves could tell it had been mass produced.

He imagined some dirty factory on some rusted planet that had pumped out these glasses on the cheap. His mind made up the tragic backstories of the handful of workers whose job entailed looking after the bots that did the actual work and cleaning up after their messes if they screwed up.

Even the water itself sent his mind into a wild story about how some primordial comet traversed the stars for billions of years before it fell into Moira's Paradise. The Nautilus of the Deep sucked up some of the fallen comet's water molecules out of pure coincidence.

"I've got to get a grip on my mind!" Ves clenched his teeth as he attempted to stop his overactive imagination. "My mind works for me, not the other way around!"

In the end, Ves had to employ his considerable concentration to force his imagination back. He maintained his highly focused state throughout the day until his imagination started to relent.

"That could have been dangerous for me." Ves wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Maybe I should show more consideration for balancing my attributes."

If he didn't possess a strong concentration, then he might have gotten lost in his own world. Ves never imagined that upgrading his Creativity could lead to such a dangerous result.

"The mind is a sensitive domain. I should be more prudent about it. I should stop swallowing all of the candies at once at the very least."

He'd become too complacent of its relatively mild effects. The candies appeared trivial compared to gene boosts that came with very strong side effects.

The ordeal forced him to pause his plans to upgrade his other Skills and Attributes. He had a sense that his imagination still needed to be tamed. Right now, Ves felt as if he birthed an uncontrollable monster in his mind. Without a leash, it could wreak havoc with his mentality.

For the rest of the day, Ves rested in his cabin, only coming out for meals and such. Meanwhile, the Nautilus continued her journey to Cava City without stop. By the time Ves recovered sufficiently to leave his cabin, the cruise ship reached her destination.

"The city looks huge." Raella uttered as she stared out from the observation deck.

"Millions of people live and work in Cava City. Of course it's huge."

Massive transparent domes littered the bottom of the Vermillion Sea. The domes kept the water out from the man-made construction contained inside. If Cava City faced a threat, the domes could even be covered by armored shutters made out of bulk exotic alloys.

To make their surroundings more attractive, Cava City spent a lot of effort in transforming its surroundings. Powerful lights illuminated the strange and colorful marine flora around the domes. Aesthetically pleasing fish and other marine life made their homes among these alien plants.

Despite the immense pressure at this depth, the plants and fish swayed leisurely along the currents. All the biodiversity gave Cava City the impression of an underwater kingdom.

The Nautilus arrived at a bustling port that hosted many other ships. Once the ship established a connection with the structure, the passengers entered the city in a figurative horde.

Ves entered the city with Raella and Lucky in tow. This time, his cat got to enjoy the sights as well. His cat purred with pleasure once Ves brought him out of the familiar confines of the Nautilus.

Mindful of his security, he also brought along a pair of guards. The cruise organization maintained a partnership with a local security firm that regularly hired out its guards to the passengers of the Nautilus. Ves had to pay an extra fee to get some piece of mind.

Once they stepped out into the nearest dome, they looked around and admired the dynamic structure and the lights flashing from their surface.

"It's so wild here. I like it!" Raella grinned.

"Strange. There's no mechs in sight."

"That's because mechs are prohibited from operating inside the domes." A nearby tourist responded to Ves. "Think of how much damage a rogue mech can do. If they're powerful enough, they can even crack the dome above our heads!"

Ves and Raella shuddered a bit at the thought. Ves had it worse as his overactive imagination started to spark a very vivid image of what a catastrophe a cracked dome could be.

"I guess that makes a lot of sense."

Even though they constantly faced the risk of a malfunctioning dome, Ves still felt safer in Cava City. The lack of mechs meant that Ves still had a fighting chance if another incident occurred.

One of their guards flagged an aircar. Once they hopped inside, the car brought them to their first destination. The car entered an underground passage filled to the brim with other vehicles and leisurely passed underneath a dozen domes before reaching the busiest one.

"Welcome to Cava City's mech district!" An invisible transmitter greeted the new arrivals as they stepped out from their aircars. "Enjoy your stay but be mindful of the rules!"

Several flashing warning signs posted at the exit the of the parking area emphasized the rules again.

The rules basically boiled down to one thing: no active mechs allowed on the streets.

"Do people break these rules?" Ves asked his guards.

"It happens more often than you think, Mr. Larkinson. Emotions run high during some of the duels. Sometimes the mech athletes put themselves under

debt in order to compete at the stage. If they lose, they stand to lose everything."

The explanation showcased the darker side to dueling scene. Raella shook her head in pity. "A lot of people don't realize how much credits it takes to run a dueling team. There's always kids entering the amateur circuit who think they can get by with their skills alone."

"What happens next?"

"They find out they're not as big of a deal as they thought. Some duelists are quicker to realize this lesson than others. Those who hold on to their delusions either have the skill to back up their confidence, or become ruined within a year."

Chapter 237 Aquatic Mechs

A large and boisterous crowd waited before the biggest mech arena in the mech district. As a fully developed aquatic planet, Moira's Paradise hosted a robust mech scene that revolved completely around aquatic mechs.

Fans of the aquatic variant of mech duels favored their brutality. The estimated mortality rate in an aquatic duel was five times higher than normal due to several factors.

First, the water pressure often killed off the pilots if the cockpit incurred minor damage. If the cockpit's automated self-repair systems couldn't fix the crack in time, that tiny crack could quickly grow into a massive breach.

Aquatic mech duels therefore came in two flavors. Low pressure aquatic mech duels occurred in conditions that simulated a depth of up to a hundred meters, while high pressure mech duels adopted a depth of at least ten kilometers. People often considered the former to be a stepping stone for the latter.

"Low pressure duels are fast and rely a lot on reflexes. While you need to master a lot of specialized skills to do well in these duels, there's not a lot of

money to be made in this circuit." Raella explained as they entered the arena's VIP gate.

"So it's kind of like the kiddie version of the real duels?"

"Yup. The high pressure duels is where the real action can be found. The mechs there are larger and slower, so the mech pilots have to move deliberately and with forethought. Every action matters and one mistake can spell a fatal end. It's a high pressure environment in more than one way, you could say."

"That sounds stupid. Why won't the organizers make things safer for the mech athletes?"

Ves didn't understand why anyone would be willing to compete in a high pressure aquatic duel. The high risks associated with these duels ensured that you might never come home after a match.

Even veteran mech athletes with a decade of experience occasionally died. Fatal accidents could happen to anyone at any moment.

"Fans pay a lot more to attend these kinds of events. Aquatic mech teams earn a ton of money if they're halfway decent, though they have to spend even more to repair their mechs."

Aquatic mechs outmassed their landborn forms by a significant amount, so it cost a lot of resources to produce and maintain these beasts. While these mechs featured a high degree of compartmentalization, any breached sections had to be written off, which added to the costs.

Once the gate personnel processed their tickets, a uniform attendant guided them to a private room that hovered above the arena. Around two thousand floating rooms surrounded the massive arena. Aquatic mechs required a lot of space to bring out their full strengths so the amount of space dedicated to this sole arena exceeded his imaginations.

Lucky made himself comfortable on a nearby sofa while Ves tinkered with the control terminal. Its various settings allowed him to project multiple angles at the same time. It also allowed him to relocate his floating room.

Ves lowered his room so that it almost went up to the transparent dome that enveloped the pressurized dueling ring.

"When will the action start?"

"The first duel starts in half an hour. Would you like some refreshments?"

They ordered some drinks and waited for the arena to fill up. The VIPs entered the floating rooms and started moving them to their preferred positions. As for the regular folk, they had to make do with the bleachers.

A lot of people already arrived early, and in the time that remained, the seats became filled to the brim. Over half-a-million people came to watch the upcoming series of duels.

"What's happening today?"

"Don't you know?" Raella looked at Ves as if he was an idiot. "It's the finals of the Sea Crown Tournament! Two of the best aquatic mech teams are going to duke it out in a series of five 1-on-1 mech duels!"

The Cava City Sea Dragons enjoyed a long and illustrious track record ever since they became the city's hometown team. They won the Sea Crown for three years in a row already.

As the challengers, the Velton Myrmidons faced an uphill battle in the coming finals, but a lot of people rooted for the underdogs. With their young team of highly talented athletes, it remained to be seen whether they could beat the odds.

"Who will you support?"

"The Myrmidons, of course! The Sea Dragons are good, but their previous team captain retired recently. This is the best opportunity for the Myrmidons to take the Crown from the Dragons!"

The spectacle finally began when a pair of announcers came into view.

"Welcome ladies and gentleman to the crowning event of Cava City! Today, the Cava City Sea Dragons will be defending their title against the ambitious Velton Myrmidons!"

Two-thirds of the crowd stood up. "Sea Dragons!"

The supporters of the challengers also rooted for their team. "Myrmidons!"

The sheer amount of energy in the air fueled a frenetic atmosphere that called for blood. Even Ves got caught up in the excitement. Just like Raella, he looked forward to the upcoming clash.

"The team leaders have submitted their final lineups! First up, the Red Kraken will get the chance to avenge his miserable defeat at the hands of the Unstoppable Juggernaut!"

People often referred to the top athletes by their nicknames. The names also helped outsiders like Ves get a sense on the piloting style of the individual duelists.

After a lot of pomp and ceremony, the pressurized arena ring started to churn.

A hatch opened up to let in the Red Kraken of the Myrmidons. Like its namesake, it had been designed to mimic the mythical kraken. With its eight articulating limbs and a host of hooks and other nasty surprises, the monstrous mech possessed plenty of tools to dismantle an opponent within its grasp.

The Sea Dragons sent out a more traditional aquatic mech. The Unstoppable Juggernaut piloted a hammerhead shark-shaped mech. Different from its

organic counterpart, the Sea Dragon mech featured a thicker and more robust head that had been designed for collision.

"That hammerhead mech must be expensive to maintain." Ves astutely noted. "The mech technicians in charge of maintaining that mech must be hating it with a vengeance."

Raella browsed the records of the Juggernaut. "You aren't wrong, but the Juggernaut and his mech is one of the best aquatic mech duelists in Cava City. Every opponent he meets on the ring has to respect his devastating rush."

Whatever damage the Juggernaut incurred, his opponent's mech likely fared worse. Such a mutually destructive game of chicken led to expensive repair bills for both sides. The Juggernaut only remained viable because he enjoyed the support of a well-funded team and the crowd loved his antics.

"A lot of viewers from the Republic tune in when he enters the stage."

"What about his life expectancy?"

Raella shrugged. No one really cared about the danger when a spectacle was involved.

In any base, the round began. The churning waters made it difficult for both mechs to hold their course, but as their jets powered up, they started to gain more control.

Both mechs circled around each other. Despite the Juggernaut's focus on collisions, his mech incorporated a small miniature torpedo launcher that he used to send out some harassing fire.

The Red Kraken intercepted most of the torpedoes by firing out short-ranged spikes from the main torso of his octopus mech.

The hammerhead mech took the opportunity to close in for its first charge. It revved up its engines and its short-range aquatic boosters to propel itself forward like a missile in flight.

"Too early!" Raella shouted.

Even if the Red Kraken focused on taking out the torpedoes, he didn't forget to keep an eye on his opponent. The Kraken smoothly dashed his mech aside, dodging the first attempt with ease.

The Juggernaut didn't take the failure to heart and steered his mech into a lazy circle to maintain some momentum.

Both mechs incurred no damage at all so far. Since the Red Kraken piloted a relatively immobile mech, he didn't bother to chase after the hammerhead mech. Instead, he positioned his mech at the side of the dome where he'd be able to limit the angles of approach of his opponent.

The tension ratcheted up. Everyone waited for the Juggernaut to make a move. As the duelist with the faster mech, he had to take action within the next couple of minutes.

"Why is he holding back?" Ves asked.

"His mech is very one-dimensional. Besides his mini-torpedoes, he doesn't have any other ranged options. The only way he can avoid a loss is if he keeps moving. He has to find the right angle and moment to charge in order to maximize his success for a collision."

The match turned into a standoff as the Juggernaut refrained from going in. Ves couldn't imagine how much pressure the duelists faced.

"He's moving!"

The Juggernaut finally chose to move, turning his circling trajectory into a straight path towards the octopus mech. As the hammerhead bore down on its

target, it initiated its short-range boosters at full strength, closing the gap at such a speed that the Red Kraken only had seconds to respond.

He juked his octopus mech upwards at just the right time to dodge the charge!

Just as Ves thought the hammerhead mech would miss its target and collide against the edge of the dome, the Juggernaut made a split-second move. The hammerhead mech cut off most of its forward jets and activated the auxiliary boosters attached to the bottom side of its frame. In addition, a large fin-shaped spike slid out from its upper frame!

The Juggernaut turned his mech's forward charge into an uppercut strike that savaged the octopus mech from below, slicing away two of its tentacles in that single pass!

The crowd went wild! Even Raella whooped at the move. "Kudos to the mech designer of that Sea Dragon mech!"

Even Ves admired the modifications put into the mech. Mech designers in the employ of a competitive dueling team often changed the designs of their mechs to keep them fresh.

A lazy team risked an awful loss if they used the exact same mechs for all of its matches. Their opponents could easily analyze the weak points of their designs and practice fighting against them in countless simulations.

Still, the Juggernaut lost his momentum after making such a drastic change of course. Before he could move his mech away, the Red Kraken pounced at the stalling hammerhead mech.

His octopus mech engaged his own short-ranged boosters and moved to envelop the hammerhead mech with its six remaining tentacles.

"Ohh! What a misplay by the Juggernaut! He failed to move away in time. Now his mech has become entangled!"

Even as the hammerhead mech cranked up its engines, the octopus mech solidified its grip on its raging prey. Its six tentacles managed to clasp the hammerhead mech tightly before it could force its way out of the trap.

Saws, spikes and other cutting implements emerged from the tentacles and started to rail against the armor of the Juggernaut's mech. Even with its thick, shock-absorbing armor, the ceaseless grind from the Kraken started weakening its weak points.

After a solid minute of thrashing, the Kraken cut its way through the side armor! The water pressure enlarged the breach and crushed the internals in that compartment. The hammerhead mech lost ten percent of its power!

Even as the Kraken continued to exploit more weak points, the Juggernaut gave up on disentangling the tentacles. Instead, his hammerhead mech engaged its short-ranged boosters for the last time, propelling both entangled mechs against the surface of the dome!

Crack!

The main torso of the octopus mech collided against the dome head-first! Even after such a shock, the Red Kraken still continued to cut apart his prey, managing to cut open another compartment!

Both of the duellists raced against time. Would the Red Kraken disable the Juggernaut fast enough before his opponent bashed his octopus mech into pieces?

The duel turned violent as both mechs suffered continuous damage.

CRACK!

In the end, the octopus mech succumbed to its wounds. Its tentacles started to lose their strength and the vital central torso suffered critical damage to its

power reactor. The Red Kraken quickly conceded before the damage reached his cockpit.

"The Red Kraken transmitted his surrender! The first round goes to the Sea Dragons!"

As the spectators stood up to cheer for their teams, Ves sank back in his seat and shook his head. The hammerhead mech had been built like a tank so it could take a lot more abuse. The Red Kraken should have let go instead of holding on so stubbornly.

"It's a bad matchup for the Red Kraken." Raella noted a little glumly. Her adopted team lost the first round, after all. "Of all the opponents he could duel, he faced off against the heaviest aquatic mech."

In a best-of-five, the Myrmidons already fell behind! They couldn't afford another loss if they hoped to obtain the prestigious Sea Crown!

Chapter 238 Conviction

The second round commenced after various bots cleaned up all the debris from the pressurized arena ring. Two very different aquatic mechs emerged from the hatches.

The Cava City Sea Dragons sent out a stubby eel-like mech. The announcers already laid out their predictions.

"Slippery Winston has entered the stage! Will the third-strongest member of the Sea Dragons deliver another victory for his team?"

"Not very likely in my eyes, as the Velton Myrmidons mean business this time! Look who they brought into the ring!"

The Myrmidon supporters among the crowd erupted in support of the mech athlete who entered.

"Firebreather! Firebreather! Firebreather!"

Unlike other aquatic mechs, Firebreather's mech took on a shape that didn't resemble any terrestrial animals. From the commentary the announcers provided, Ves learned that the designer adopted an original shape that didn't resemble any Terran or exo creature.

If Ves had to describe Firebreather's mech, he'd say it resembled an octagonal honeycomb. Its symmetrical angular sides all featured octagonal-shaped armor plating. Besides functioning as modular armor, the armor plating also camouflaged the placements of thrusters, boosters and weapon hardpoints.

The logic of its unusual design became evident once the round commenced. The eel mech approached the octagon mech, slithering forth with electric grace. Sparks of current ran throughout its frame, making it obvious that tangling with it up close was a bad idea.

Slippery Winston started off the engagement by launching a pair of high-powered harpoons at the octagon mech. Both of them punctured through the octagon mech's relatively weak plating.

"Firebreather got harpooned! But will it stick?"

A strong current ran through the cables between the harpoons and the eel mech. Yet before it could do much damage, a spark of liquid heat erupted from the affected side of the octagon mech. The cables melted apart, freeing Firebreather from the electric attack.

The octagon mech started to spin a bit and present an undamaged side to the eel mech. Its strange shape gave the mech a lot of options as it possessed an array of weapons and thrusters at each side. Constraints in disposable space limited their power, but the enormous redundancy gave the mech a lot of options.

Not content to sit back and let Slippery Winston out of his grasp, Firebreather sent his mech forward and fired off volleys of short-ranged heat attacks.

Even if Slippery Winston gained his fame for his ability to dodge all kinds of attacks, the wide area heat sprays proved extremely difficult to avoid. His eel mech specialized in agility, but its top speed left something to be desired.

"It's like a battle between a striker and a skirmisher." Raella noted. "Except this skirmisher is a little slow."

"It's hard to design an aquatic mech that can go faster under these circumstances."

Mech designers had to allocate an exponential amount of power to mobility if they wished to make an aquatic mech go faster. Thus, most deep sea designs emphasized agility and power over pure speed.

Right now, Slippery Winston's eel mech started to look cooked as its armor plating started to break down from the continuous exposure to heat. The duellist of the Sea Dragons attempted to fight back by launching harpoons and missiles, but the octagon mech's ridiculous amount of redundancy made it look like they fell into an endless hole.

"This match is over." Ves predicted. He could tell that the eel mech didn't have much in store except to go all in.

Ordinarily, such a move would be best as it could use its deadly electrical currents to fry its prey from within.

Slippery Winston must have realized his predicament. As his eel mech started to get cornered, he finally stopped avoiding the attacks and dove head-first into the octagon mech.

"Oh, Winston is going in! Will this be the end?"

"He's falling right into Firebreather's hands!"

The octagon mech blasted out a giant spray of heated liquids that struck the eel mech head-on. The sheer amount of heat distorted the water around them, but Ves could see that Slippery Winston cleverly rotated his mech to spread the damage over its frame.

However, the octagon mech kept pumping out a constant torrent of thermal energy. Firebreather decided to dump his full arsenal at this moment, which rapidly degraded Winston's mech.

Yet the eel mech still persisted under these circumstances. It used the tail end of its frame to lash against the octagon mech, smashing aside the armor at those spots.

The two mechs continued to batter at each other, hoping to force their opponent to concede first. The contest of endurance turned into a contest of wills. Whoever lost their nerve first would be savaged by the pumped up crowd!

Even Raella clenched her fists at the action underneath their floating room. "Get closer!"

"I can't. There's too many rooms in the way!"

A whole pile of floating rooms had congregated around the side where the fighting took place. The VIPs all wanted to get close to see the outcome of this decisive moment with their very own eyes.

Moments like these reminded Ves why he adored mechs. The visceral combat stimulated the primitive part of his brain that craved for blood. For all humanity pretended to be civilized, deep down they still let themselves be ruled by the instincts that evolution had been slow to erase.

The sense that he lost his purpose started to fade as he got caught up in the fight. He made an important realization during this match.

"Mechs embody violence."

When Ves recently worked on his limited edition mechs, he explicitly designed them to be display models. While there was nothing wrong with designing mechs for peaceful purposes, it should never be his primary focus.

A real mech should be bred for war. Any refinements that Ves chose to add to his mechs should never overshadow their primary purpose of destroying their enemies.

The duel reached its final stages when the octagon mech managed to burn a large gap in the frame of the eel mech. Firebreather instantly capitalized on the weak point by focusing all of his heat attacks on that spot!

A low boom echoed from the dome as something critical inside Slippery Winston's mech exploded! The disruption caused by that explosion opened up the insides of his eel mech to water, which quickly crushed the delicate internals inside the affected compartments.

The referees forced a halt to the fighting because Winston had been knocked unconscious from the sudden shock. Fortunately, his cockpit's integrity remained intact, so he escaped from the duel with his life intact.

Ves lost interest in the tournament at this point. The subsequent matches proceeded rather tamely as the mech athletes played conservatively and dragged out the time. None of them wanted to end up like Slippery Winston.

Even Raella started to yawn when the standoff between two shark-like mechs went on for more than fifteen minutes. Both mechs primarily relied on spikes and torpedoes to harass their opponents to death.

Only the dedicated fans remained excited for their adopted teams. Ves stopped caring about the outcome and instead focused on the mechs themselves.

All of the mechs he had seen so far possessed a spark of life. Ves could tell that each mech adopted a unique design that had gone through numerous evolutions. Each time they sustained significant damage, their designers tweaked the designs so that the mechs fared a little better next time.

They were very much opposite to the clinically clean and lifeless machines of the MTA. Mechs produced through materialization paid for their perfection with their souls. Even if they delivered superior performance over mechs produced through fabrication, Ves wondered if they represented the answer to making better mechs.

It depended on the potential of the X-Factor. Ves only scratched the surface with this metaphysical phenomenon. He suspected that a stronger X-Factor might have dramatic effects, but he was years away from another breakthrough. At his current level of progress, achieving those levels seemed far away.

"What do you think about materialized mechs?" Ves asked his cousin out of the blue.

"You mean that fancy new production technique from the galactic center? It sounds like it's really expensive. I'll probably be dead before materialized mechs become mainstream in our neighborhood."

"Do you think they're better?"

"Of course! It's more expensive, so it must be worth the money, right?"

Her answer revealed that Raella didn't know much about mech production. A mech pilot like her wouldn't know the difference.

Would Ves still have a place in a future where materialization became reasonable enough to take over the galactic rim? If mech pilots started to become more exacting about their demands, then Ves expected to face a lot

of difficulty trying to achieve the inhuman level of quality that materialization easily provided.

Something started to crystallize in his mind as he wrestled over this issue. Ves had always been fascinated by the X-Factor. Since he already achieved some progress, he owed it to himself and the System to see this journey through.

Even if materialization came with many benefits, it could not replace the fundamental value of plain-old craftsmanship. Mechs should come with a human touch.

His newfound conviction seemed to cleanse his mind once again. Rather than regard materialization as an inevitability or a looming threat, he treated it as an alternative that he already ruled out.

If the mech market progressed in a way that favored materialized mechs, then Ves would continue to fight for mechs produced through more traditional ways.

He'd prop up his own market if he had to.

That was not to say that he aimed to fight against this technology. Materialization offered a lot of benefits in other industries that had always been chasing after zero errors. Progress couldn't be stopped once it was unleashed. The mech industry as a whole stood to gain a lot from this method of production as well.

"Not everyone cares for a handmade mech."

The vast majority of mechs sold today consisted of cheap, mass-produced mechs. Once materialization became more affordable, the lower end of the market should gain a lot of benefits as the overall quality went up.

The Sea Crown Tournament reached its final act as the Sea Dragons and the Myrmidons went even with each other. Both teams eked out two wins, beating

most people's expectations that the reigning champions would easily steamroll the challengers.

Ves regained his interest in the tournament once the final round commenced. Both teams sent out their team captains for this decisive match.

"Jackknife Jake is carrying the final hopes of the Myrmidons! Will he be able to deliver on the promise he made to his fans, or will he return to Velton with empty hands?"

"Not if the Sea King has anything to say about it! With over nine years of duelling experience, the King has reigned over our planet for three consecutive years as he led the Sea Dragons to victory time and time again!"

Jackknife Jake piloted a medium-sized angular fish mech with lots of retractable weapon hardpoints. Ves could tell his mech relied on hit-and-run attacks with its sharpened fins to grind his opponents down.

In contrast, the Sea King piloted a sea dragon-shaped mech. The extravagant machine had clearly been designed to evoke a sense of majesty, as if it was a given that the Sea King should reign over Moira's Paradise. Its design achieved an optimal balance between power and flexibility. Its two claws added a lot of extra options to the Sea King's arsenal.

"Jake!" The Sea King broadcasted through an open channel which the arena passed on to the crowd. "Your team did well this year, but your lucky streak has come to an end. You've never defeated me before. The outcome is already set!"

The team captain of the Myrmidons responded, if only to please his supporters. "Boast after you win, not before! I've crawled through countless rivals to get to this point, beating expectations along the way. Even if you have the better machine, nothing is ever set in stone!"

While Jackknife Jake piloted a very good aquatic mech, the amount of money invested into the sea dragon mech beggared the mind. From what Ves could tell, the Sea King's mech was worth at least three times as much as Jackknife Jake's machine.

"Is the outcome already determined?" Ves softly asked to himself. Personally, he found the Sea King's attitude to be repulsive. He started to root for the Myrmidons again. "Come on, Jake, show him what a better pilot can do!"

Chapter 239 Dancing Along The Edge

Despite the disparity in value between the two mechs, the outcome of the match was still in doubt.

Jackknife Jake's bladed fish mech possessed superior speed and agility over the larger sea dragon-shaped mech. He showcased his strengths at the very start of the final round by darting along the flanks of his opponent's mech.

While the Sea King possessed the advantage of power and endurance, he wouldn't be able to leverage them properly if he couldn't get a grip on his opponent. The King knew this and didn't bother to chase after his opponent. He drifted in place and retaliated whenever Jake got close.

"How many weapons are stuffed inside that mech?" Raella asked with surprise as the sea dragon mech showed off its arsenal. "That's like five or six weapon systems already!"

Ves had also noticed its diverse array of weapon hardpoints. "It's like a hybrid mech in a sense. It possesses both short and long-ranged options."

The sea dragon-shaped mech's main armament consisted of its sharp and sturdy claws and teeth. Jake respected their threat to his mech and always tried to attack the Sea King from the rear.

A variety of weapon systems dotted around the frame of the sea dragon. Much like the octagon mech that appeared before, the sea dragon mech hid

the exact placement of those systems underneath identical scale-like armor plating.

The sea dragon fired spikes, torpedoes, harpoons and all other assorted weaponry at the approaching fish mech. Its ammunition seemed limitless as it attempted to constrain Jackknife Jake with suppressive fire.

The bladed fish mech incurred a decent amount of scratches from the barrage. Jake chose to dodge the harpoons even if his mech had to eat a face full of spikes. In return, his mech got close enough to rake through the sea dragon mech's sides.

"Both of them are not holding back! Jackknife Jake is throwing all caution to the wind, knowing that he won't be able to last long enough against the Sea King's superior range advantage!"

"The Sea King must not be feeling so well. His mech's agility pales in comparison to the killing machine in the hands of Jackknife Jake. Look at how he's tearing a boatload of armor plates with every pass!"

Jackknife Jake dished out a good amount of damage, but Ves could obviously tell his mech degraded faster than the sea dragon mech. As a speed-focused mech, its armor would always fall behind to a mech that aimed for balance.

More perversely, the Sea King obviously splurged a lot on the armor system of his mech. The scale-like plating took a lot of force to dislodge or cut through. Each time Jackknife Jake made a pass, his mech lost momentum, something which the Sea King eagerly pounced upon. The balance of favor started to tilt against the Myrmidon team captain.

A huge lance emerged from the mouth of the fish mech. Jackknife Jake abruptly ceased dancing around the sea dragon mech in favor of a direct approach.

The Sea King had obviously been off-guard, but a pilot of his caliber didn't remain stunned for long. The dragon mech opened up its own jaws and ejected a large orb that it had kept hidden all this time.

The lance hit the orb head-on and exploded. Like a mine, it detonated with a furious shockwave that impacted the fish mech at virtually point-blank range.

Just as everyone thought that had been the end of the Myrmidons, Jackknife Jake emerged from the murky waters with a battered but functional mech! Another lance replaced the broken one that detonated the orb, allowing Jake to continue his rush towards the Sea Dragon.

This time, the Sea King had been truly caught off-guard, to the point where his mech instinctively fended off the lance with its claws. The lance pierced right through its left claw and pushed on to impale the upper torso. Jackknife Jake quickly detached the lance before squirreling away, leaving the weapon pinned in his opponent's mech.

"How did Jackknife Jake survive that mine?! Quick, rerun that segment!"

The entire audience turned to the closest projection to see a slow-motion replay of the last encounter. Moments before the first lance pierced the mine, Jackknife Jake detached the lance and abruptly engaged his mech's reverse boosters, cutting off its forward momentum and allowing it to escape the brunt of the blast.

"What a fast reaction! Jake chose to overload his reverse boosters at a critical moment! Even if they're fried, they've done their job!"

The lance embedded in the sea dragon mech affected its mobility in a serious way. The Sea King's mech experienced a lot of problems when it tried to transfer enough power to the thrusters placed along its frame.

The Sea King went mad this time. "I'll crush you like a bug, Jake!"

The sea dragon mech showed off its full capabilities as its jaw ejected dozens of mines. They floated around the Sea King's mech like an omnidirectional guard. Cables shot out from tiny openings, connecting the orbs to each other like a net.

The nets then started to chase after the fish mech. Jackknife Jake had to abort his hit-and-run attacks in face of this new weapon. While the nets didn't move very fast, their expansive reach and coverage fully constrained his mobility.

Having ejected all of the mines in its stores, the sea dragon mech then revealed another weapon from its gaping jaws. The cone-shaped barrel turned out to be a sonic cannon as it started to emit continuous sound waves towards the dancing fish mech.

Like a wide-area flamethrower, the sonic weapon's range fell off quickly. Nevertheless, the mech piloted by Jackknife Jake already started to fall apart. The Myrmidon team captain had to make a difficult choice. Either he braved the storm and risk annihilation, or he could keep his distance and bet that the sea dragon mech ran out of power first.

Mech pilots tended to favor aggression over inaction, so Jake decided to make one more play.

"Why is he going in? His mech doesn't have much left." Ves noted with puzzlement.

From what he could determine, the Sea King piloted a ridiculous aquatic mech. The mine net alone countered every possible move that Jake could make.

"He'll be letting down his team and his fans if he gives up at this point." Raella explained. As a former amateur mech athlete, she had a keen understanding

of what went on in his mind. "Even if he has to put his life on the line, he owes it to his supporters to continue the fight."

The damaged fish mech dramatically charged towards the sea dragon mech. The Sea King overloaded his sonic cannon, but the weapon merely tickled the fish mech.

As Jake reached the mine net, he revealed his final trump card. Moments before his fish mech collided against the net, his mech split in half!

The forward section of his mech crashed against the net and caused the mines to explode, obscuring everything in the vicinity.

The Sea King tentatively backed away. His mech's excellent sensors caught the moment of separation, but before he could put much distance from the blast, Jake emerged from the turbulent water with just half of his mech intact, yet it moved just as fast as before!

Jake's mech had obviously been designed to split beforehand. The rear part of the original fish mech took on an hydrodynamic spear shape that turned the newly revealed front portion into a stubby wedge that looked sharp enough to split apart its opponent.

His mech bore down on the sea dragon mech with the help of single-use boosters that he kept in reserve up to this point!

"Is he going to make it?!"

As Jackknife Jake came within spitting distance of his opponent, the Sea King ceased his futile attempt to dodge. Instead, he oriented his mech to allow its tail to take the blow in its stead!

A huge explosion occurred at the moment of impact! At the very last moment, Jake ejected his cockpit from his half-mech, leaving the rest to collide and

explode against the Sea King's mech in a cataclysmic blast that spread out countless of broken components in every direction.

The Sea King obviously hadn't expected an explosion of that magnitude to erupt from the kamikaze mech. His sea dragon mech slithered out of the polluted waters in a bedraggled state.

Only its high quality components kept the mech functional, and even that came into doubt as the mech's power reactor started failing. The previous lance strike had opened up a weak point in the Sea King's mech that the collision and explosion had ruthlessly exploited.

A tense and chilling mood ran through the audience as they waited for the Sea King to revive his mech. The outcome of the match depended on whether his mech could still put up a fight.

According to the standard mech duels, even if a mech duellist was left with a cockpit, as long as it possessed a single backup thruster and a piddly little gun, it remained in contention. The floating cockpit piloted by Jackknife Jake demonstrated both requirements as it slowly recovered from its uncontrolled ejection.

Just as everyone thought the Sea King had fallen from his throne, his sea dragon mech emerged from its slumber for the very last time. It moved its broken form and turned a claw towards the slowly drifting cockpit.

A single claw tip ejected from the limb. Even if it hadn't been propelled with a lot of force, it reached Jake's cockpit in a blink and pierced through its feeble shell.

"The cockpit has been breached! Jake's life signs have flatlined!"

"A fatality! The Sea King murdered Jackknife Jake before his victim could concede!"

The entire crowd uttered their outrage at the final move. Only the hardcore supporters of the Sea Dragons remained enlivened. The rest appeared to condemn the unsportsmanlike move. The screams of anger, horror and indignation flooded the entire arena to the point where they drowned out the announcers.

Even Ves expressed his shock at that final, spiteful act by the Sea King. "Why did he do it?"

"Because it's within the rules." Raella responded with a sour expression.

"When you dance along the edge, you're going to get cut sooner or later. Jackknife Jake thought he'd be clever by piloting a kamikaze mech, but as long as he and his mech remained combat capable, he's fair game. It's not his opponent's responsibility to save his life."

"So you're allowed to deliberately kill your opponent during a duel?"

"Essentially, yes, but most people don't go out of their way to do so. Not only will you get a bad reputation, you'll also lose your sponsors."

"I don't think the Sea Dragons has any trouble attracting sponsors."

Whatever the case, the referees had no choice but to rule the match in favor of the bloodied Sea King. It turned out that his crippling mech only had a few seconds of uptime left. If his mech ran out of juice before he did something to Jake, then the long-held Sea Crown would be lost for the first time in three years to the upstart Myrmidons.

The Sea King faced a difficult decision. If the captain of the Sea Dragons wished to retain the Sea Crown, he had to disable Jake's cockpit by any means possible, even if it meant a lethal outcome.

He chose to do what was best for his team. Even if he had to throw away his reputation, his team secured the vaunted Sea Crown for the fourth time in a

row. With bloodied hands, the Sea King cruelly showed how far he would go to defend his title.

As the analysts, pundits and fans poured over those final moments, Ves directed his floating room away from the dome. Numerous bots already entered the ring and began retrieving the remains.

"People will do anything for fame." Raella spoke up. "Each time you enter the ring, you risk an accident that can take away your life. There's always a risk of death when two big hunks of metal go toe-to-toe against each other."

"What about you? Did you ever fear for your life when you entered the ring?"

"Of course, but adrenaline and a little extra liquid courage helps a lot in pushing those doubts away. You don't want to start a duel with a clouded mind. Even if fatalities happen, I never thought it would happen to me."

The sad outcome to a hopeful match put the entire mech arena in a somber mood. Ves didn't pay attention to the subdued closing ceremony where the deputy team captain of the Sea Dragons accepted the Sea Crown for the fourth time in a row. The Sea King himself didn't dare show up in front of the audience.

The dramatic turn of events put Ves in a strange mood. After having established a lifelong conviction, witnessing the extent the team captains fought to win had opened his mind to what kind of original mech he'd like to design.

Ves closed his eyes and turned his focus inward. A fleeting inspiration bloomed into a vivid image that centered around determination.

"Never give up. Fight to the end!"

Chapter 240 Reflection

For his upcoming original design, Ves already chose the Phoenix as its totem animal. He envisioned designing a durable knight that should be resilient enough to last a lengthy war.

However, a great design should accomplish more than mere survival. Ves forgot about the drive to succeed. No one wanted to lose. Planning for the worst was fine and all, but sometimes you've gotta risk it all in order to achieve a win.

"Avoiding a loss is not a sufficient goal. A mech should be designed to accomplish a specific objective."

He sketched out a possible character he could utilize as the human myth component of his Triple Division Technique. While he hadn't fixed a specific image in mind, he felt determined to include some ambition and the need to win in the list of possible traits.

As the Sea Crown Tournament wound down, Ves guided his floating room away from the morbid arena dome and the restless crowd. A lot of security bots appeared to keep the defiant supporters of the Velton Myrmidons in line. They were one step away from rioting over the heartless killing of Jackknife Jake.

Even though the competition came to an unfortunate end, Ves did not regret attending it. The collective emotions of the spectators and the dramatic turn of events in the ring had revitalized his drive to design an original mech.

In a sense, he reacquainted himself with the *raison d'être* of mechs.

For all their higher ideals, humanity ceaselessly sought to expand their rule over the galaxy. They began their conquest of the stars with the advent of interstellar warships. They consolidated their gains by establishing a flourishing mech culture.

Ves, Raella and Lucky stayed at an exclusive hotel next to the arena and spent the night there.

As he slumbered, Ves dreamt of the fantasies had in his youth and blended them with the harsh realities he learned in his adulthood. Designing an original mech was tough, but Ves never thought he would have an easy ride.

As he woke up the next morning, Ves left the arena domes behind and visited the cultural districts of Cava City. He toured the museums and art galleries for ancient monuments of fallen alien species and contemporary art alike.

Each individual piece carried a message. The best works of art came with rich flavours of X-Factor that had been imbued by their creators.

"What do you see in this piece of junk?" Raella complained as she crossed her arms. "It's just a barstool, Ves! You call this art?"

"I can tell the artists here are sincere. Can't you feel the emotions in the pieces?"

"My tummy is feeling hungry. When are we eating lunch?"

"Soon. Let me take in the sights first."

The art gallery put this particular ensemble in a notable position. The room they stood in had been converted into a metallic interior reminiscent of the insides of a spaceship. Rents and molten marks on the walls evoked the image of a desperate battle.

Devastation formed the theme of this exhibition. An artist collective called the Epitaph Among The Stars recovered several mundane pieces of space wreckage and turned them into display pieces.

Even though the artworks didn't look too remarkable, they resonated very strongly with his sixth sense. The emotions put in their compositions spoke of

the dedication of the artists that made it their mission to remember the fallen from the void of space.

The other exhibitions never came close to matching their exquisiteness. Half of the art pieces he encountered in the gallery came with an empty void that spoke of two possibilities. Either they were fake, or the artists left the composition to a bot.

Either way, Ves found it rather disappointing that the curators valued such pieces. What would happen if materialization became mainstream in the art world? Would every piece of art become husks that were too detached from their creators?

From the way the museums and art galleries couldn't distinguish between real or fake, Ves held low expectations of the future.

Besides witnessing how other people unconsciously imparted the X-Factor in their works, Ves also received a lot of inspiration for his upcoming project. After the brutality he witnessed last night, the distraction pulled him back from the brink.

"Violence and civilization goes hand-in-hand, but it's not a good idea to lean too far in a single direction."

The industry generally abhorred mechs that catered to the darker nature of humanity. Designs that emphasized their ability to evoke terror and inflict mass casualties even received censure from the MTA.

Mechs should never be employed as a weapon of terror. While plenty of people outright made a mockery out of that rule, normally the market favored noble mechs.

Even a heavy striker armed with heavy-duty flamethrowers could be considered heroic as long as its design emphasized its role as a defender. Perception and reality didn't always have to match.

Ves absorbed this lesson slowly as he visited many different art galleries in the next two days. The way the artists played at the perception of their audience really inspired his creativity.

Some of the most impressive works of contemporary art consisted of four-dimensional displays that changed their form over time in a dynamic fashion. The artists accomplished these effects through the use of modern technology and a small amount of exotics.

One remarkable artwork consisted of a mirror that purportedly showed an alternate reality version of whoever stared into its reflective surface. People could only see their own reflections. No matter where anyone else positioned themselves, they would never be able to glimpse another person's alternate reflection.

Most visitors treated it as a fake curiosity as they saw themselves in a vastly different state of appearance. Perhaps a sophisticated computer pulled up various data from the galactic net and extrapolated a somewhat realistic image of what they might have been if some details of their past had taken another turn.

No one really believed the artist's claims that he had breached the barriers between the universes and opened up a window.

The reflections appeared to be completely random. Some looked thinner, as if they couldn't even afford to eat the most basic nutrient packs. Others wore resplendently brilliant dresses, as if their income had been inflated by over a hundred times.

Raella claimed she saw herself as a successful mech athlete who had gone pro. She wore a piloting suit emblazoned with the name of her old team, the Wailing Witches. Her suit even carried sponsorship symbols from several notable household brands.

Ves felt apprehensive when he got his own turn to look at the mirror. What would the clever computer system behind the illusions come up with as his reflection? Once the latest person moved away from the reflection, Ves stepped up to the full-length mirror.

"Is that me?" He sounded disappointed.

The Ves that looked back from the mirror looked decidedly average. He wore poor clothes that could be obtained with a couple of dozen credits. His body looked thin but not malnourished, showing that he barely made a living in this supposed alternate universe.

Much of the confidence and success that he enjoyed as a mech designer was absent from the reflection. Ves supposed that the reflection indicated his most likely fate as an individual if he never received the System from his father.

Crushed by debt and lacking both talent and connections, Ves would never be able to come up with a product in time to pay off the first interest payment that came due. Coming up with five million credits on his own proved wholly impossible to a mech designer without the right foundation to survive in the mech industry.

The Larkinson family must have refrained from bailing him out as well. With their modest net worth, they'd be ruining the foundation of their estate if they threw good money after bad in his hopeless venture to become an established mech designer. The most his grandfather could do was to secure his rights after the inevitable bankruptcy.

Obviously, he didn't take his failure very well. One year after the presumed closure of his nascent workshop, Ves must have probably turned back into a useless bum. Deprived of a promising career in the mech industry, he fell off in the deep end and lived from day to day in a wallow of self-pity and recrimination.

The next visitor in line started to get impatient as Ves stared at his own alternate reflection with melancholy. His self-esteem took a substantial hit in that moment. He only regained his composure after left and took a break by eating a meal at a nearby restaurant.

As Raella munched on a fat piece of aeliotonoc whale steak, she gently bonked his head with her knuckles. "Cheer up, Ves. Whatever you saw in that stupid mirror isn't you. Look at what you made of yourself in these last couple of years. You're a big shot now!"

"You're right." He sighed as he cut a piece of his own steak. Ves found the whale meat to be a little chewier than he liked. "It's a depressing reflection, but it's only one of many possible realities. What matters most is that I've avoided that fate."

Ves spent the rest of his allotted time in Cava City by attending a silly play. The performance centered around a setting where humanity and aliens struck a friendly accord. The play made fun of the diverse aliens humanity had befriended.

The performance made use of advanced projection technology to capture the speech and movements of an isolated actor and project them into a life-like alien characters. From upright horses with twelve limbs to a floating brain that manipulated its surroundings with tentacles, their antics roiled the audience in a flood of laughter.

"Why are you speaking to my waste channel? My nostrils are down here!"

"My apologies. My exhaustive lessons in human culture and etiquette has taught me that I should always start undressing myself after exchanging a couple of words!"

"By the Seven Three-Horned Gods! Humans are disgusting! They douse themselves in the foul and smelly liquid known as water for up to two times a

day! Imagine the horror known as hygiene! We must declare war against this race to teach them the value of going without a bath for years at a time!"

What Ves enjoyed the most was how the play obliquely parodied aspects of society that they all took for granted. For example, while humanity universally maintained hostile relationships with aliens, why should they be locked in a constant struggle for dominance in the galaxy?

Space was vast, with billions of stars in the Milky Way alone. Not even the most prolific races had grown to the point where they ran out of space. Even if most star systems lacked deposits of exotic minerals, that didn't mean they were useless.

Humanity constantly hungered for exotics to fuel their ceaseless struggle for territory against the aliens and themselves. The play Ves and Raella attended presented a scenario where humans never resorted to war as the first option. While they maintained a decent amount of war assets, they mainly served as a deterrent rather than a prelude to a full-fledged invasion.

In this possible setting, the playwright envisioned that the lack of constant warring diminished the hunger for exotics, thereby placing less importance on securing star systems with deposits of these valuable resources.

With peace as the prevailing condition, human society occupied a smaller but more densely populated slice of the galaxy. The lack of competition even allowed their race to unite in a single common union that maintained the same set of laws and customs throughout their entire territory.

Such a silly future could never exist. Ves had a good laugh along with the rest of the crowd when the play made a mockery of this presumptuous vision.

"Humans are a greedy, jealous race that always takes away what other races possess." He reminded to himself. He spoke those words with pride.

At the end, Ves left the theater in a tired but satiated mood. All the ups and downs he experienced in the last couple of days had refreshed his mind even as it took a toll on it. In any case, he experienced a lot on this planet and gained a lot of inspiration on his upcoming project.

His holiday on Moira's Paradise had given him a lot of food for thought. While he didn't get to relax all that often, the mental stimulation he received should be sufficient to flesh out a draft design for the mech of his dreams.