

### Chapter 29: Bentheim

The appearance of Ves raised some eyebrows from the pilots and their chaperones.

"I haven't seen you around in class." One of the men stated as he looked at Ves' collar. "Are you sure you've boarded the right shuttle?"

Every potentate wore a small pin on their collar, chest or arm that denoted their status. It was an exclusive privilege to the 3.5% that marked them special. With it, they enjoyed priority services, had access to VIP sections, and had their safety taken care of first before the rest could take their turn. The entire scheme originated from the New Rubarth Empire, but pretty much every human state other than the Terrans copied the treatment. They also took over the rule that stated that any fraudulent use of such pins invited severe punishment.

"Security already screened me before letting me in. I'm a participant of the YTE mech design competition."

"Mech design?" A young fresh-faced woman dubiously said. "So you're not a pilot."

"No."

That pretty much killed the conversation. The pilots all turned around and went back to their own discussions.

The blatant disregard hurt Ves a little, but he had grown used to such behavior ever since he turned ten. Before his genetic aptitude was tested, he behaved just as arrogantly as the other potentates. It took a brutal fall from heaven to realize how conceited he actually behaved.

"I was a stupid punk back then. I got what I deserved, but the rest ingrained this dismissive behavior."

It couldn't be helped. Modern society worshiped martial prowess, and a disproportionate attention was placed on mechs. Sometimes it appeared that society revolved around pleasing potentates.

Certainly, placating pilots was important, but the soldiers who bravely enlisted in the other service branches also deserved some honor. Spaceships guarded their borders against capricious aliens while infantrymen occupied territory and cleaned after the messes mechs usually caused when throwing around ordnance.

Nothing could be done about it, though, so Ves took the dismissal without complaint. It wasn't as if he achieved anything of note that justified anything more than an absent glance. Only Lucky attracted some attention, but the mostly female pilots were too preoccupied to get distracted by his cuteness.

The departure time arrived. The shuttle lifted off after everyone was accounted for. The inter-system shuttle ample power to lift off and escape Cloudy Curtain's atmosphere. Like a sparrow taking flight, the shuttle fluently broke the confines of the planet's gravity and followed a pre-programmed flight out to the nearest Lagrange point in the local star system.

Lagrange points provided fast and convenient launch points for FTL. Any shuttle or spaceship capable of travelling faster than light departed from a Lagrange point whenever possible, but were only capable of reaching the edge of a solar system as their destination.

While the possibility exists for highly advanced spaceships to arrive at their destination's Lagrange point, the act was considered near suicidal. It was like threading a needle, except one single mistake could cause the ship to smash itself apart in weird gravitational stresses, leaving the debris to fall into the local sun.

Everyone played it safe, including the transport shuttle. It took only a moment for the shuttle to reach the nearest Lagrange point. It waited in line as other vessels departed first. Once the shuttle came forward, its sleek and narrow form visibly warped into an elongated form before launching into FTL.

The shuttle lurched a little when it entered FTL, but after that the passengers felt nothing else. After hundreds of years of refinement, human FTL technology had earned a track record for safety and reliability.

The flight from Cloudy Curtain's star system to Bentheim only took less than a day due to Bentheim's favorable gravitational position. It made travelling to the economic heart of the Bright Republic convenient. Besides having no one to talk to, Ves enjoyed the flight.

Once the shuttle arrived at the edge of Bentheim's star system, it flew towards one of border outposts Bentheim established to meet incoming vessels. Smaller systems such as Cloudy Curtain normally wouldn't bother with this formality, but a major port like Bentheim necessitated increased security checks.

Many ships formed an orderly line in the space set with beacons. Small patrol ships flew alongside them, scanning their interior for any contraband while determining their origins and destinations. The shuttle from Cloudy Curtain only warranted a brief scan before being let through by the space security forces.

The passenger shuttle nimbly navigated deeper in the system like a fish swimming along a river. It passed by several plodding haulers and heavily armed warships. It kept its distance from rickety looking mercenary ships and anything else that hinted of danger.

After half a day's flight, they finally approached the planetary orbit of Bentheim. From above, the heavily populated planet looked like a paradise

that mixed greenery with high tech urban development. Ever since Bentheim established itself as the premier port of the Republic, the government invested trillions of credits in its ability to accommodate an endless amount of visitors and cargo.

The shuttle landed at a crowded spaceport near the capital city called Dorum. Yes, the pilots and their chaperones were practically booted out of the shuttle. As soon as they stepped out, the shuttle left in order to make way for another passenger shuttle.

Captain Gillian, the lead supervisor of the contestants from Cloudy Curtain, led them to a prepared atmospheric transport that brought them to a hotel near the venue. After leaving the shuttle, they entered the hotel in order to check-in and left behind their luggage.

"Alright pilots, the Young Tigers Exhibition officially starts tomorrow. You're free for the rest of the day, so go play at the local game center or shop until you run out of credits. I only have a few rules that I hope you can follow for your sake."

The captain lifted up a finger. "First, be at the venue at 6:00 local time. If your comms haven't automatically adjusted their internal clocks, do so now. Tardiness is no excuse."

A couple of pilots activated their comms, and some of them had to adjust their settings.

"Second, you'll be tested for any drugs or intoxicants the moment you enter, so for god's sake don't go party in a club and get smashed. More than a handful of contestants find their qualifications revoked after imbibing a suspicious drink. Don't rule out sabotage from your competitors. There's spies and agents everywhere in the city."

This caused a couple of pilots to gulp, though most of them snorted or dismissed the warning as a fantasy. As natives of Cloudy Curtain, the people in power never paid much attention to them. The best pilots of the Republic all graduated from institutions in Bentheim or Rittersberg.

"Third, do NOT get into an altercation with your rivals from other pilots. We're all Brighters here, so don't lower your standing in front of the foreigners. We have guests from all over the star sector here, so keep your roles in mind."

The young men and women appeared to listen attentively, but Ves knew most of it would be thrown right out the window a few seconds later.

"If you break any of these rules, don't expect to participate in the Young Tigers Exhibition. You're grown ups, so bear the consequences of your screw-ups yourself."

With the rest of the late afternoon and evening free, Ves exited the hotel holding Lucky against his chest alongside the other participants. The mechanical cat opened its artificial eyes wide as it beheld the exciting view in front of him. The crowded thoroughfares revealed that even at the outskirts, the capital hosted a lot of guests at this time. Every YTE was a celebration of martial might, so the Bright Republic hosted a couple of other activities to accompany the event. The mech design competition was just one of many additions.

"Let's see. Tomorrow's the qualifiers, the day after that is the main event. Once the YTE ends, I'll have to return to Cloudy Curtain immediately if I want to fabricate and deliver my mech in time."

Ves had very little time left, so even his free time should be spent on improving his chances of doing well in the competition. "Let's visit the mech show rooms."

As the commercial capital of a port system, Dorum featured hundreds of mech museums, mech dealers, and mech workshops. It featured a healthy local ecosystem that made it convenient for many people in the mech business to run a business.

Unfortunately, the rent was prohibitively expensive and the competition was cutthroat. A new entrant with no existing connections to the industry had no chance of establishing a workshop in Dorum, or anywhere else on Bentheim for that matter. Ves chose to setup his workshop in Cloudy Curtain not just because it was his home, but more due to the low taxes and hassle-free regulations.

"Besides, shipping stuff to and from Bentheim from Cloudy Curtain isn't expensive at all. It makes little difference except for the difficulty of attracting customers."

In a major metropolis like Dorum, most avenues and streets featured greenery, art and seating of all kinds. Most transportation traveled far underground or high up in the air, so the bustling city never appeared congested. He entered one of the tunnels, slapped his comm against the scanning block, and waited for a small hovercar to appear before him. A number of passengers including Ves and Lucky entered the car before it closed up and zipped deeper into the heart of the city.

Ves opened his comm and studied the map of the city. He entered a few search parameters and found a listing of mech show rooms open to the public. Narrowing the list down further, he was finally left with three venues that featured the Caesar Augustus. Two places showed off the base model, while the remaining show room hosted a variant.

After arriving downtown, Ves took a smaller underground vehicle in order to bring him to the first venue called Bosworth's, a giant branch of one of the biggest commercial dealers of civilian mechs in the star sector. With the name

of the company emblazoned at the front of the stadium-sized show room, it attracted countless of pilots and enthusiasts every day. After paying a small fee at the entrance, Ves entered the interior of the show room and found his way to the section where their Caesar Augustus was hosted.

After several minutes of appreciating the other mechs on display, he finally reached one of Bosworth's prized possession. Ves squeezed through a crowd of hundreds as they admired and took pictures of the tall, majestic mech.

Seeing it in person made the trip worth it to Ves. He built the mech and several of his personally developed variants many times by hand, but eventually he had to admit his only real experience was in a virtual workshop. How could working with digital code compare to working with real metals and real components?

Even from a healthy distance, Ves felt the Caesar Augustus emanate an air of majesty. It was as if the model was an emperor of mechs, and that it was natural for all other mechs to bow before his presence.

"This craftsmanship is good. It's not a standard model by National Aeromotives, that's for sure."

With his deep knowledge of the Caesar Augustus, he noticed a few minute traces that spoke of a different fabrication philosophy than what NA or Jason Kozlowski adhered to. These personal touches brought the base model along a different path to its peak.

"I wonder if the craftsman who worked on this particular model is aware of how he meshed his own thoughts into the model."

With his extensive research on the X-Factor, Ves started to get a rudimentary sixth sense for the phenomenon. He spent plenty of time watching replays of TheSeventhSnake and Melinda in action, so he knew vaguely how the X-

Factor was expressed. He tried to identify the vague sensations of emotions the model emanated, however faintly.

"It feels.. the fabricator is old. Experienced. He treated the Augustus as his magnum opus, his best work. He must not have licensed the model himself, but got the opportunity to fabricate it once somehow, perhaps because he got hired for a single job. He relished the chance of being involved with building up an advanced mech, so he treated the work reverently."

The unconscious feeling of worship the old fabricator felt towards the model unintentionally enhanced the end product's awe. Perhaps that was why Bosworth acquired this particular specimen and showed it off in public. It certainly enhanced the chain's prestige.

"This was a worthwhile visit. I see now that there's a slightly different way of regarding the Caesar Augustus."

Ves naturally refused to adopt such a servile philosophy. He believed that men were masters over the machine. No matter how sophisticated the mech, it's still created as a vehicle for a pilot to protect or destroy. Naturally, with his recent studies of the X-Factor, his views had adjusted slightly, but only in the sense that mechs performed best when they were created as similar-minded partners to their pilots. There was no need to go overboard and act as if humans were the slaves in this relationship.

After the fruitful visit, Ves left Bosworth's and walked down a couple of blocks and visited another company's show room. Though smaller, the seller mainly sold premium mechs, so it received even more attention from the public. A long line of visitors waited in front of the store and Ves had to cough up a much higher fee to finally enter the premises. Seeing the magnificent mechs all around him made him feel he was in mech heaven. But since he was short on time, he only threw a glance before reaching his destination.

The Caesar Augustus Ves saw was virtually identical to the first one. Nevertheless, compared to the previous mech which managed to look imperial, this example seemed.. diminished. Perhaps it was due to the different lighting, or the fact that other expensive mechs surrounded it, but the mech that Ves seemed diminished.

"Many people were involved in its construction. The contours and components rigidly adhere to the standards demanded by its design, but that's the only advantage this model has. It's like this model is built by an assembly line."

It was a manner of fabricating that spoke of scale, precision and efficiency. Instead of letting one fabricator make all the components by hand, a factory employed many people who all specialize in fabricating one single component. There would be one guy who makes only sensors, another person who's in charge of armor plating, and so on. This specialization insured they maintained quality while keeping up a decent production pace. One of the worst things that could happen to a large scale manufacturer is the occurrence of faults, so employing specialists or AIs that could take over such a role was key in maintaining consistency.

"It works if all you care about is the technical performance of the mech." Ves commented, feeling regretful that the manufacturer had not brought this mech to its full potential. "I can't say I blame them. You can't measure X-Factor. Even though I learned so much, even the most renowned experts must still not have any means of quantifying the X-Factor."

You couldn't put any value in an attribute that couldn't be seen or heard. Plenty of mechs with a high potential of X-Factor were treated like disposable trash. That was because industry standards favored mass production over individual craftsmanship. Even the mech designers that start a business by themselves let their employees take over the tedious work of fabricating his models when the designer achieved success. They only bothered crafting

hand-made versions of their mech to familiarize themselves with the model and fix any production issues that might occur.

After leaving the show room, Ves intended to visit the show room with the customized version of the Augustus. However, after his comm beeped an alert, he knew he had to return to the hotel. The qualifiers for the YTE started tomorrow morning and he had to wake up early in order to make it in time.

"The time for me to prove myself is about to come." He grinned, relishing the chance to showcase his newly acquired abilities in front of a stage.