Chapter 51: Test Pilot I

Captain Caruthers sat in the dark and silent cockpit. The entire enclosed space was isolated from any outside noise. Only the rhythmic tapping of his fingers against the only red shade in the space bounced off the metal walls.

Bounty hunting was a tough business for any upstanding mech pilot to pursue. It went beyond the basic jobs like guarding outposts or patrolling conflict zones. In many cases, pilots simply had to wait long hours standing by and only occasionally get into the cockpit to deter a couple of opportunistic raiders.

The amount of incidents happening in the outskirts of the Bright Republic was fairly low. Most people thought the nearby systems and asteroid fields were barren of high-value resources. Only a couple of the more common exotics could be found, and small mining concerns eked out a small profit from exploiting them at a low cost.

"Even a barren hinterland like the Bright Republic can be squeezed of resources if you make it worthwhile enough."

The pirates that were shabby enough to operate in this space sector came in three flavors.

Local criminals made up the most of the numbers. Hooligans who went down the wrong path, these delinquents mostly piloted whatever mech they could get a hand on and generally didn't last very long due to a lack of support structure or any kind of long-term strategy. They generally made a big splash at the start but got hunted down quickly enough.

Caruthers considered these amateurs his bread and butter. Hunting them down offered very little risk but only paid enough to make ends meet.

The second type of pirates blended semi-legal identities with occasional illegal forays. Most people considered them organized crime, though the actual

workings of these groups was a lot blurrier than that. Often it meant companies that dipped into the dirtier side of competition or mercenary companies that decided to turn against their employers. Naturally you also had the classic organized crime groups, often centered around the planets they based.

As a captain of a small bounty hunting group, Caruthers generally stayed away from messing with these so-called pirates. Many groups often relied on deeper backing. Defeat the son, provoke the father. Defeat the father, provoke the grandfather. And on it went until you ran into a solid wall.

The last type of pirates represented trouble. Foreigners used to operating in more developed space sometimes fled to galactic backwaters to shake off pursuit and lie low. If you were lucky, these losers only carried a basic mech and whatever else they haul off on short notice. If not, then they came fully prepared, with large spaceships, ample supply and advanced mechs an entire generation ahead of what the Republic's Mech Corps used.

These giant wrecking balls basically showed no regard to the local balance of forces. With a technological edge and a mobile base that allowed them to skulk the outskirts, these snobby exiles often acted as if they were in charge.

Often times the Mech Corps took them down a peg. Just because the Bright Republic used the least advanced mechs among all the human states, didn't mean that anyone could push them over. In fact, it was quite the opposite. The pilots of the Mech Corps worked hard to get in their position and fought many small skirmishes in their active service. The local space sector was a hotbed for low-level troublemakers.

Consider the the latest major sortie of the Mech Corps. The Red Feet, A top mercenary group of some second-rate state, lost their occupation rights to a lucrative mining planet due to collusion by their vassals. These smaller groups

normally acted like rats, but one of them had the bright idea of banding together and rebel against their masters.

Evidently, they succeeded, because the Red Feet fled like sailors abandoning a sinking ship. One of their splinters managed to cross through six star sectors before finally arriving at the borders of the Bright Republic.

They quickly made themselves home by violently displacing the local interests group of a nearby planet. As their advanced mechs and other equipment was expensive to maintain, they did as many other outsiders had done and demanded excessive 'taxes' from the local populace. A few riots and bloodshed later, the Mech Corps finally smashed their remaining ship and much of their mechs apart.

Naturally, that wasn't the end of the story. A couple of individual mechs aboard private shuttles managed to escape to FTL range and transitioned to other star systems. It didn't matter which one, they only cared if it had no presence. If the Mech Corps had to split up and hunt them all down, they had to waste a massive amount of time.

Better to employ bounty hunters like Caruthers to do the dirty work for them. Though the risk of facing a superior mech was substantial, Caruthers trusted his team to beat this foreigner the same way the Mech Corps smashed their whole group. With teamwork and superior numbers.

The cockpit rumbled a little. Sounds from the outside made it clear the shuttle Caruthers boarded with his mech had finished landing.

"Let's get this show on the road."

He pressed the red gem in the middle of his console and made his mech come to light. Bright red colors unfolded in his projectors like a flower coming to bloom. The entire cockpit lighted up as Caruthers breathed deeply and let his brain sink into the neural interface.

The warm, familiar presence of his personal mech embraced his return. Despite owning the Phoenix Cry for a few weeks, Caruthers already considered it to be his home.

"You're also likely to be my last mech." Caruthers endearingly spoke to his mech as he caressed the console's surface. "I'm too old to go out and hunt the scum of the galaxy. Let's have a blast and make it to the end."

The Marc Antony model progressed through its startup with rapid efficiency. As Caruthers finished booting up his mech, he connected to the audio channel where his six teammates were already present.

"Miley, how's your big one?"

"I'm still hearing creaking from my left knee. I swear the grease monkeys have been slacking off again!"

The other pilots in the channel exchanged their own usual banter. Caruthers paid little attention to them as he reviewed the information his sources had gathered once again. "Pipe down, boys and girls. Let's go over the job. We've got a tip that there's a Red Feet squirreling away in an abandoned mine in whatever fucked up place this is called."

"Don't you think you should call him a Red Foot?"

"Ah, whatever." Caruthers waved his hand. "Despite being cornered, the Red 'Foot' that's in the mine has enough knowledge to use the abandoned gear inside to build himself a makeshift fortress. Any attempts by the local militia to oust this Foot came back with a bloody nose and millions worth of damage. Don't be too complacent. This guy's a tough cookie."

"What's his loadout?"

"That's the troubling thing. This guy's mech is all set for extended engagements. His machine is a medium rifleman with a souped up laser rifle.

And before you hope he's run low, he took away the husks of the mechs he downed and scavenged all their energy cells. And that's not taking into account whatever energy he could scrounge up from all of the mining equipment available."

All-in-all, it sounded like a bad situation. With a powerful laser rifle pointed in the only entry point of the mine, no casual group of mercenaries could take on such an opponent and come out ahead.

Too bad Caruthers encountered plenty of bastards in his career, many of whom pulled much worse out of their horrid bag of tricks. Holing up in an abandoned mine in the middle of nowhere was nothing special.

"Miley, how's your digger?"

"It's all set. You know I'm always harping out replacing this dinky old model, right?"

"Hey, if it works, it works. I'll think about replacing it once the one we got breaks down completely. It's not as if it's the end of the universe if our digger hits the dust."

"Yeah yeah, whatever you say boss." Miley rolled her eyes as she guided the wheeled drill-like machine out to a low hill. "The topography doesn't quite match the data we got. I can already tell you there's been a few shifts or landslides."

"It doesn't matter. The mine is largely the same so our entry point should still work."

Miley fudged a bit with her placement before choosing a random spot that looked somewhat promising. She set the digger machine at a shallow angle. It was just enough to allow mechs to walk without tipping over while still be able to dig downwards to hit the underground tunnels.

When she finished setting the machine, everyone took up their positions with some looking out in each direction. Others gathered at the entrance of the tunnel.

Though none of the intel gathered so far suggested that the rogue pilot had a partner, nothing was certain.

Caruthers took up the front position with his mech facing the digger. He readied his mech and did some last-minute checks. "Everyone ready?"

The digger engaged once the team finished all their checks. The cylindrical digger machine rotated its screw blades and dug right into the soil. With the speed and noise it emanated, the everyone in the area could guess what was going on from the rumbling alone. This was never about stealth. It was all about shock and awe.

"Seven minutes until we hit the tunnels!"

"Keep an eye on the entrance, report if you see anything suspicious, and I do mean anything!"

The foreigner must have known what was going on, but he prudently stayed in the depths. If he unwisely chose to expose himself, he'd be easily mobbed by Caruthers and his crew.

"Five minutes remaining. No response detected so far."

"Three minutes left on the clock. Hardly a peep."

The digger machine eventually breached the mining tunnels with a thump. The team went into action. One shield-bearing mech kept close to the entrance of the mine to keep an eye on it while Caruthers led the way into the newly excavated tunnel.

The digger dug a tunnel barely wider than the top of their mechs, so the team that went in only consisted of two shieldbearers. Caruthers led the way, with Miley close behind.

"What's he going to do? Will he face us or escape the tunnel?"

Caruthers felt sweat pour down his neck. No one ever liked to be on the receiving end of an advanced laser rifle. Though he tested his newly purchased mech extensively and even had his own technicians comb over it for any defects, he still felt he was taking a huge gamble.

The dark and narrow tunnel lit up like a firework as a white-hot beam splashed against his Marc Antony's shield. Caruthers cried out even though the deadly beam carried no force. Instead, he imagined his mech's arm growing warm as the heat of the energy weapon spread out onto its entire surface.

"Contact! I'm hit!"

"Shit, that beam's measuring fifty percent higher than my own!"

"Follow plan A. Enter the tunnel from both sides and pincer that bastard from two directions!"

Another laser beam hit his shield, scorching several layers of HRF armor into slag. The overall temperature of the shield also increased, though its thickness afforded it plenty of time.

The rifleman was not in an ideal position to shoot. Miley had cleverly programmed the digging module to increase its slope as it dug further downwards. This meant the tunnel looked more like a crooked banana than a straight cucumber. This forced the rifleman to enter the tunnel and come close if he wanted to get an unobstructed firing line.

Caruthers tried shooting back with his free wrist cannon, only for his laser beams to go wide. His wrist-mounted lasers simply couldn't compete with

regards to accuracy. The mere act of moving forward spoiled his aim at this range. The rifleman on the other hand not only enjoyed a superior weapon, he also boasted real marksmanship. Almost each and every single beam shot landed against the same spot on the Marc Antony's red shield.

"This bastard's a really good shot. My shield is halfway from getting its bottom half melted off."

"Hang on, Caruthers. We're two-thirds of the way."

Perhaps the rifleman regretted choosing to fire down the new tunnel. Caruthers resolutely made his way forward as he put his complete trust in his mech. He showed no hesitation in enduring the brutal barrage of laser fire. His shield might be cheap, but it was also fairly thick and possessed plenty of mass to absorb the heat.

By the time they came into spotting distance of the end of the tunnel, the enemy pilot abandoned his initial aggression.

"Looks like he got on to what we've planned." Caruthers cursed as he failed to trace his target. "It's going to be a pain hunting him down these side tunnels."

"Hah, at least your shield served its purpose. We got in without another scratch. If the only thing we need to replace is a shield, then this job paid off in spades."

As they almost came upon the entrance, Caruthers felt something amiss. He normally felt as comfortable as a baby when piloting the Phoenix Cry, but suddenly he felt a nudge of some sorts that warned of danger. Following his instincts, he readied his old mech's sword that he used to replace the crappy mace and braced his mech for a surprise.

The tunnel exploded into flame as some kind of explosive set off just in front of him. The shockwaves bounced off the narrow walls and buffered the shield and the mech that was holding it with pressure and flame. Caruthers held on

to his shield with dear life, hoping that it would hold against the violent boom in front of him. By the time the lower end of his shield started to bend dangerously inward, the danger passed.

"We've encountered an improvised explosive. Careful at the main tunnel. Don't get fooled and step on something you shouldn't."

"We've heard the explosion from our end too. We're slowing down and scanning ahead."

Just as Caruthers set his mech upright, a blur approached his front and smashed against his shield, almost toppling the Phoenix Cry over.

"SHIT! He's here!"

Unusual among mechs, the advanced model in front of him wielded a blunt but heavy staff. It took a while to get it going, but it possessed devastating reach and could deliver a large amount of kinetic energy with each strike.

The narrow tunnel prevented Miley from coming up to the side to help. Even firing her weapons was out due to the risk of hitting her own side. As long as the enemy held position, it could bottleneck their team from this side.

"Miley, don't come close. Just ready your shield and sword and get ready to back me up."

"Your shield is almost a goner, Caruthers. That staff will smash it apart in three or four moves!"

"I can handle it! This guy spent weeks on the run. I've got a fighting chance."

With the backup team forced to slow down in order to avoid setting off traps, Caruthers fought with gritting teeth against one of the most challenging opponents of his career.

The enemy pilot evidently mastered both ranged and melee mech combat. His staff moves dazzled the mind. His dextrous mech was able to handle wide

sweeping moves as well as fast jabs and turns like an actual human. Only the extensive wear and tear and the lack of maintenance slowed the advanced mech's reactions enough for Caruthers to keep up, somewhat.

"I never imagined baptizing this my new mech with a fight against a machine two generations ahead."

His shield received too much damage. The enemy mech prioritized speed and dexterity over power so his staff strikes were not too overwhelming. However, the technological gap between their two models gave the foreigner a distinct edge. The shield eventually broke into two halves.

"Fine! Let's play it your way!" Caruthers growled and recklessly charged closer while throwing the remaining half of his shield against his opponent. To his credit, the foreigner anticipated the move and deftly redirected the spinning slab to the side. The mech then continued on with its rotation, borrowing the force of the impact to spin the other end of the staff straight down the Phoenix Cry's crested head.

If that staff hit his mech's head, he'd be crippled for a couple of seconds, enough time for the foreigner to launch another critical strike. Caruthers felt his heart pump faster as his mind threw away all other distractions.

There was only him, his mech and the staff in his eyes. A spark of red seemed to flash and he took advantage of his lightened load to rapidly lean backwards. At the same time, he emptied his shoulder launchers in one go, disgorging a haphazard payload of long-ranged missiles.

Such weapons usually required a hard lock onto the enemy mech in order to be effective. Despite the close range, the missiles pretty much flew blindly. Some of them impacted the walls of the tunnels, causing a couple of explosions to spread out all over the narrow environment. Some of the missiles impacted the foreigner's mech but failed to detonate due to the

minimum safe distance set in their programming. Only a handful finally managed to explode the enemy mech, causing minor damage that hardly amounted to any loss of function.

What the missiles did achieve was to blow the enemy a little back, delaying his incoming strike. Still, the momentum behind the attack was so strong that it kept swooping down.

The time those missiles bought allowed Caruthers to come up with another measure. He let loose a scream as his mech held its sword with both hands and struck the head of the staff with the flat side of his blade. The impact stunned both mechs, the Marc Antony model more than its opponent.

The medium mech took a couple of steps backwards as it tried to shake off the impact. The Phoenix Cry on the other hand fell down in an undignified way. The sword held, but Caruthers wouldn't trust it to last a couple of years.

As Miley was about to hop over his fallen mech, the captain grunted out a signal. "No! He's mine. I can finish the job!"

With proficient handling, he guided his mech up to its feet with a firm push of the hands. The Phoenix Cry then thundered forward while blasting the front of the tunnel with a twin barrage of lasers. At this range, missing was no concern, and every blast landed somewhere on the enemy mech's surface.

The foreigner was unprepared for the assault and faltered a little. The advanced mech received more scorch marks and even lost a few layers of armor. The attack gave Caruthers an opportunity to get close before his opponent built up his momentum again.

With the initiative on his side, Caruthers fiercely pressed his opponent with a couple of rapid sword strikes. While the foreign pirate skillfully fended off the attacks with the staff, his mech kept getting pushed backwards. They

eventually exited the narrow tunnel and came into a larger central mining area.

"Miley!"

"I'm on it, boss!"

Miley's mech entered the area after the two and rapidly moved to the sides. Smelling trouble, the foreigner knew he ran out of time. With a renewed resolve, the enemy mech pushed into the next sword strike, allowing it to land cleanly on its shoulder. With the Phoenix Cry's sword half-embedded into the advanced mech's shoulder, it let go of its staff and punched the Phoenix Cry's chest.

"Hah, is that supposed to do something?" Caruthers laughed as he endured the impact in his cockpit.

With bloodthirsty eyes he commanded his mech to twist its sword arm and pull back the weapon. With another swipe the blade hit the advanced mech's head, cleanly slicing it in half.

His opponent went berserk. The staff flew in every direction but Caruthers took advantage of the uncoordinated assault to get some distance.

By now, almost everyone in his team had reached the open cavern.

"Everyone, open fire!"

An avalanche of lasers and ballistic shells engulfed the poor pirate.

Chapter 52: Test Pilot II

Joshua smiled with satisfaction as he leaned back in his piloting chair inside his personal simulator pod. After months of grinding up the ranks, he finally broke past the Bronze League and entered the Silver League. For a teenager of his age, reaching such a height was impressive. Only the top 3% of the potentates in his grade matched or surpassed this result.

"Aw man, you've finally promoted. Looks like we won't be playing together for a while." Triceratopsss whined over the comm.

Joshua, or TheSeventhSnake in the game, smiled back at his friend. "Hey, at least you won't be taking too long to follow me up. You've been showing plenty of improvement."

"I got more time to hop in the game now that summer break is here. I mean, the mech classes are fine and all, but a real match always beats a dry lecture."

While Joshua didn't entirely agree, he kept his opinions mum. "I'm going to go pick out a new mech to play with the big boys. Are you interested in helping me choose?"

"Nah. I got to go eat dinner soon. See ya later, pal."

As both of them went their separate ways, Joshua entered the market district of the game. He approached a familiar holographic panel and set the category of the items from 1-star junk to 2-star mechs.

The machines that appeared in front of him roused his interests. The mechs all looked bigger, leaner or more ferocious than their more primitive counterparts. He long dreamed of piloting a more powerful machine than his favorite Seraphim. While the flier was a great machine, he came to grow frustrated at the mech's extensive limitations. Joshua longed to free himself from those chains.

As he browsed through the many light fliers the catalog held, a recommendation attracted his eyes. The market interface pointed out a new 2-star mech to him. One designed by a familiar name.

"Chasing Clouds? So that's what you've been up to. No wonder I haven't seen any 1-star designs from your account."

Joshua regretted not piloting anything new from the upstart designer. Though his products were never the best performers in their categories, they all possessed plenty of character. It also helped they both came from the same planet.

He looked at the latest product the fellow Cloudsman released. When his view was filled with the shiny chrome exterior of the variant called Mist Prowler, Joshua was blown aback.

"It's just like the Seraphim."

He did not refer to technical aspects when he compared their designs. The Seraphim was a light flier that mainly relied on a marksman rifle to harass enemies from afar. He only got in close to melee range if he needed to change his strategy.

This Mist Prowler on the other hand lacked any flight capabilities. Not only was it a weight class heavier, it also packed more power in its limbs, allowing it to run fairly fast for a medium and dodge about with almost unprecedented response time. It largely mimicked the nimbleness of light mechs while possessing the power of a medium mech. This helps with adding strength to its melee attacks, which this urban combat mech primarily relied upon.

No, despite their differences, they emanate a similar presence despite their different playstyles. Joshua was probably the most intimate Seraphim in the game, so he had a nose for these kinds of things. The Mist Prowler was just as aggressive as the Seraphim, only in a different flavor. Whereas the Seraphim sought to seek and destroy the enemy in the most direct fashion possible, the Mist Prowler was content to drag out the hunt and slowly envelop their opponents.

"Hm, that's strange. What's with the stealth option?"

Adding a particle ejector to a hunter or ambush type mech wasn't unusual. But Joshua couldn't figure out why the designer added it to a mech with such a bright and shiny chrome finish.

Then he noted the designer incorporated his practically trademark Cloud Festive Generator right next to the ejector. "Ah, so that's why."

Joshua had a lot of fun playing around with the Cloud Generator. It made him the envy of his friends whenever they teamed up. Though it served no practical purpose and often attracted the enemy to him, he liked to arrive on the battlefield in a bombastic fashion. He loved using it to play games with his opponent's minds.

The mech was different from anything he played before, so he considered whether it was useful to purchase this mech. As his first 2-star mech, he wanted to pilot something familiar so he could leverage his best skills immediately. If he picked the wrong mech to start his career in the Silver League, he might lose too many matches, causing his hard-earned rank to demote. That would be a disaster.

"It's from Chasing Clouds. I don't think he'd release something crappy."

He trusted the designer. He sometimes felt there was a connection between them, an intimacy many pilots had for their favorite designers. Sometimes they became so enthusiastic they resembled fanboys and fangirls. Joshua liked to think he wasn't so blind, so he took the time to scour over the specs and look over the simulations of the variant before making his purchase.

"Ah what the heck, who am I kidding. I'm totally going to buy this mech anyway."

Though the hefty credit price was a step up from the dirt-cheap 1-star mechs, Joshua never paid attention to even eye-popping prices. With a quick credit transfer, Joshua now owned the first handmade Mist Prowler.

As Joshua returned to his private area and entered the mech stables, he could feel the presence of the Mist Prowler. It demanded attention even as it wanted to stay unnoticed. The dichotomy easily caused confusion, but Joshua only felt more intimate towards his new mech. He understood the designer's philosophy, having mastered the Seraphim. No matter how much the designer tried to make a subtle mech, he just couldn't resist showing off. Why else did he include cloud generators and bright colors?

After a brief time of familiarizing himself with the new mech's controls, he threw himself into matchmaking. As he wanted to put his mech to its paces, he chose to enter the gigantic Wartorn Instances mode. Even the smallest 50v50 map possessed plenty of space for him to work his magic without bumping into too many people.

The game finished matching enough players together, causing them all to enter their team's lobby. Joshua took a look around. This was his first match in Silver and he knew that he wasn't playing with people from Cloudy Curtain anymore. Once a player graduated from Bronze, the entire galaxy opened up to them allowing them to play with people tens of thousands of light-years away.

A big and bulky spider mech stood in the center of the room. The small crown hovering over its head demanded everyone's attention.

"Alright guys, I'm NotchedHalberd, and I'll be your captain for this match." A young man's voice spoke out from the team channel. "As we're all playing in the Silver League, I won't bore you with complicated plans. I know only 10% of you will even listen to me. Instead, I just want you to keep one thing in mind: don't all rush forward when the hatch opens up. We artillery mechs need some help fending off the enemy scouts."

Whether much of their team followed this advice, Joshua wasn't hopeful. In fact, he planned to ditch his teammates and find an empty zone to hunt for

prey. He could only really stretch his new mech's capabilities by fighting without distractions.

The map eventually loaded and caused the bay doors to open. The map revealed itself to be a hot desert canyon like map. Groans issued out from most of the mech pilots, especially those that relied heavily on energy weapons.

"Fuck! It's Scorched Canyon!"

"Goddammit, it's so hot you can cook an egg on a rock. Who the fuck thought of this stupid scenario? There's nothing here that's worth fighting for!"

"90% of my loadout is based on lasers. I don't know about you guys, but I'm going to sit here and afk for a while."

Hot environments impacted energy-dependent mechs disproportionately. In the real universe, mech outfits tailored their mechs to the local environment in advance. Unfortunately, Iron Spirit's matchmaking kept the map the players had to contest over a secret until the match finally started. This always caused some mech pilots to wallow in misfortune while others danced with glee.

Joshua also plastered a smile on his face. While the Mist Prowler was not set up to fight in deserts, it nevertheless held a slight advantage. His mech's offensive power only consisted of a few melee weapons. The lack of any wrist or shoulder-mounted weapons limited Joshua's offensive options, but honed his mech's strengths in a couple of categories that could be fully exploited in the coming match.

"Don't let the enemy bastards take over all of the top ridges!"

The Scorched Canyon map featured an unusual layout with many winding cliffs and canyons. The final objective of this map was to conquer and hold an ancient alien ruin situated in a deep valley in the middle of a lot of cliffs. Holding the nearby high ground was essential in either sieging the valley or

preventing the enemy from taking advantage of them. However, the top plateaus were inaccessible to all but flight mechs. Their presence was essential in taking over the map.

Joshua raced forward and grew more in tune with his mech as he did so. His first movements looked awkward, but he quickly got used to the unusual balance of his agile mech. By the time he traversed halfway to the valley, he could easily dodge pass rocks and other obstacles in his way.

A couple of mechs that traveled in the same direction as him veered off as they entered a narrower route that brought them to the flanks of the valley. Unlike many others, Joshua continued to head straight towards the center.

"Hey noob! It's dangerous if you go into the ruins!"

"He's dead already."

"The fucking loser probably doesn't know how this map works at all."

The risks were exceedingly high if he entered the valley too early, but Joshua could rely on his mech to pull through. The Mist Prowler crossed the wide open space with a sprint that neared the speed of the fastest medium mechs.

Unfortunately, its shiny exterior easily reflected the bright sun in the sky, drawing all sorts of unsavory eyes at him. The scouts that have already reached the nearby ridges grew red, and those with ranged weapons started to fire potshots at him. At this range, the chances of getting hit was minimal, but Joshua didn't enjoy the experience.

Incredibly, he managed to dodge all but a couple of glancing blows. The pressure of incoming fire was a powerful motivator to mastering the Mist Prowler's quirks. His mech practically danced through the hazards with only a few scuffs marks from accurate laser fire. Even the onlookers from his own team popped out their eyes.

Once Joshua reached the midst of the ruins, he was able to use the tall stone structures to break line of sight. Though the enemy could keep raining down fire, damaging the ruins penalized their team's final score. Only by employing scouts and spotters to feed accurate coordinates would teams be able to bombard an enemy occupant without causing excessive collateral damage.

"The first part is over." Joshua sighed as he came down from the high. Though he only piloted his new mech for a short while, he already felt it moved like his own body, but even better. The mech's amazing mix of speed, agility and strength made this mech a great close combat mech. Now that he cast the bait, he only needed to wait until an enemy approached.

Joshua got his first customer. A three-man team of light scouts hastily entered the ruins from the other side. His own team tried to punish their brazen approach and succeeded in scratching their paint at the very least. One mech even suffered a malfunction in his rifle when it got blown apart by a lucky shell.

Ordinarily, a speed-based medium mech preferred not to tangle with light mechs. They moved faster than them while possessing similar amounts of offensive power. The disparity in armor could be negated entirely if the light mechs could use their speed advantage to stay out of reach. This disparity widened the medium mech possessed no ranged weapons.

The Mist Prowler unfortunately lacked even a pistol.

"No matter. These ruins will be my best friend."

The ancient and extensive alien ruins represented the closest urban combat environment in the map. While he could also play around in rock-littered canyons, the spaces there were just a little too small. While the Mist Prowler excelled in complex environments, they needed a certain amount of room to maneuver, which most narrow canyons lacked.

As the three scuffed light mechs crossed over to the other side of the ruins, Joshua prepared for their arrival. He held no hope in hiding his mech from their superior sensors. Instead, he walked his mech around and chose a suitable area to make his stand.

The Mist Prowler was not a mech that enjoyed letting his enemies come to him. By choosing to set up at busy street, he could use the plentiful structures to block the enemy's field of view and force them to come closer. Like a spider sitting in the middle of his web, Joshua waited for the mechs to fall into his range.

When the first of the light mechs stepped into the narrower street, Joshua initiated his plan. He activated his particle ejector, which instantly blasted an entire canister's worth of sensor-blocking junk in the air. The cloud generator also did its work by pumping out a generous amount of psychedelic vapor.

The modules expended their payloads rapidly, causing a couple of blocks of streets to be obscured from optical as well as many other types of sensors. This not only blinded the light mechs, it also prevented onlookers from above or below to interfere with Joshua's hunt.

He grinned as he felt his anticipation grow. Having mapped the surrounding streets before, Joshua slowly piloted his mech forward. The mech's footsteps weren't exactly subtle, but the panicking light mechs allowed him to get in close.

The mech with the damaged laser rifle showed up in front of Joshua first. The Mist Prowler came out far too sudden for the enemy mech to respond in time. Its shiny exterior reflected all kinds of bright and crazy colors due to the rays passing through the colorful vapor. In fact, the effect worked even better than traditional camouflage.

"Death!" Joshua yelled as he urged his nimble mech to thrust forward with its spear.

The force behind his approach was incredible, but the light mech was no slouch either. The enemy pilot bent his mech to the side, causing the spearhead to penetrate the edge of its waist but no deeper.

"That's not all I got!"

Usually, a mech that put most of its forward momentum in a weapon thrust left itself open to retaliation. Joshua merely pushed his Mist Prowler to jump sideways with the enemy and allow the spear to slash the light mech again.

The force behind the second blow wasn't too much, but Joshua was able to control his strike to hit the damaged section again. Few other mechs could achieve such acrobatics.

The spearhead carved through the light mech's armor like a hot knife through butter. The fatal hit allowed the spearhead to wreck a couple of components near its engine. Not enough to take it out entirely, but enough to slow down the light mech's mobility.

"He's here! Come and save me!" The enemy pilot yelled out in the open as he was unable to connect with his teammates with all the interference in the air.

"You'll be dead before they come!"

The light mech tried to turn the tables on the Mist Prowler by diving forwards within the spear's reach. However, Joshua skillfully spun the spear with remarkable dexterity and knocked the light mech's stride off-track with a smack. With another spin he slashed his spear at the enemy's arm, but the lack of power and momentum behind the hasty blow only caused the armor to get cut.

Joshua was a little frustrated with the spear. It worked great if he could build up his speed and stab forward with the incredible weight of his mech behind the blow. Close in like this and it felt more like an unnecessary burden. Therefore he simply dropped it and pulled out the Mist Prowler's heated knives from their holster.

With a pair of hot blades in its hands, the medium mech surged forward in pursuit. The light mech scrambled to parry one knife, only to let the other make a shallow stab in its chest. Before the light mech could pull out, Joshua kept up his barrage and pressed his opponent relentlessly.

One of his knives finally dug past the chest armor and tore a deep gash in the light mech's power reactor.

"Urgh! Fuck! He got me!"

With its mobility impaired and a faltering power reactor, the light mech was practically dead in the water. A couple of follow ups finished off the poor mech.

"First kill." Joshua licked his lips. He started to like this new playstyle. Though the thick mist of particles and colors made it difficult for him to seek out his opponents, they also had a hard time bumping into him.

He realized that using the particle generator on an unsuspecting group negated their numerical advantage. As long as they weren't too close, his mech could take all the time in the world to defeat them one by one.

With only instincts and luck guiding him to his next prey, Joshua led his Mist Prowler deeper into the hazy fog. He had two more mechs to hunt down before the particles sank down onto the earth.

"Heh. What Silver League?" He mocked. "Within my mist, they're dead men walking."

The long match reached its end stage. Most of the fliers were already shot down, while many other mechs were down to their last reserves. The canyon's ruins were mostly blown apart. The frequent close-quarters combat and the occasional artillery barrage flattened so many ancient structures that the city was unrecognizable.

While many other mechs started to run slower, the Mist Prowler came alive. Though the scorch marks and many holes caused the mech to lose its shine, the mech navigated the rubble-strewn streets with remarkable alacrity. Its movement at the start of the match might as well be as slow as a slug compared to its current form.

"This modular armor sure is something." Joshua commented as he moved his mech with his functionality mostly intact.

The more square plates he shed, the faster his mech moved. Shedding so much weight in one single match was a new experience for him. It felt as if the Mist Prowler turned from a medium mech into a light mech. If the internal damage wasn't so bad, he'd actually be able to keep up with fast mechs in a race.

"Too bad the damage is just too extensive."

The many holes in his mech's armor exposed the internal sections to the elements. Though Joshua's dodging improved, he could not prevent flying rocks and other types of wide-area damage from degrading the more delicate electronics. The erosion already turned his mech's left arm into an inert limb.

A heavy knight approached the Mist Prowler's side. Compared to the half-wrecked medium mech, the knight looked fairly pristine with its intact sword and shield. The mech survived the grueling match so far by being too sluggish to reach most skirmishes in time.

"TheSeventhSnake, how's your reserves?"

"I'm down to about 25%."

"I still have 40% left in the tank." The knight boasted. "We've reached the final ten minutes of the match. We have to dislodge whoever's left alive from the central temple."

Joshua looked up his team display and only counted five mechs still alive on his side. Of these five, two never showed up anywhere. Only the Mist Prowler, the heavy knight and a light sniper mech stuck together within the ruins.

"How many enemies are in the temple?"

"I last counted five of them, but that might have changed."

That meant they were effectively outnumbered. Joshua did not like his chances. He worked hard to take down four enemy mechs and drive away many more. Each of his opponents provided him with a hefty challenge. He now fully appreciated the proficiency of Silver League players. While not all of them possessed balanced skills, they almost always had a trick up their sleeve.

"How much of that smoke do you have left?"

"I'm down to my last canister. It won't last long enough to kill off all five of them. They also know my tricks now so I doubt it will be effective in separating them from each other."

"We won't need to separate them in order to win. In fact, I want you to force them to stick closer together." The heavy knight's pilot surprisingly stated. "If they're clumped up together, then our sniper can easily bracket the area with laser fire. Sure, most of them will miss, but if even 20% of his shots hits something, we're on the right track."

That was a fairly ingenious plan, if not for one thing.

"If I go in, I might be liable to get hit by my own side." Joshua said. "But if I don't go in, the enemy has no reason to cling together. They'll just spread out and try to escape the sensor blocking range."

"You need to go in. If we want to win, we have to take some risks."

"And what will you be doing?"

"I'll be standing next to our sniper, making sure he won't get ambushed. Look, you don't need to kill all five of them yourself. Just try to occupy two or three of them. You can leave the remainder to us."

The plan was wracked with holes, but Joshua couldn't figure out another way to win. The longer they stayed near the temple, the more their capture score accumulated. Once it reached the limit, they'd win the match.

Joshua parted from the pair with a heavy heart. He was essentially tasked with acting as distraction and bait. Victory and defeat rode upon his shoulders. He didn't want his first match with the Mist Prowler to end so ignominiously.

"C'mon fellow, I know you have it in you. Please stay together for a couple more minutes."

His back cage holding the cloud generator and projector lost a lot of weight as the match went on. Almost all of the canisters were missing as Joshua already used them up. Only the last canister remained unused. Joshua programmed the particle ejector, and then initiated a delay. He controlled his mech to quickly detach the back module and throw it in the direction of the central temple.

The particles instantly engulfed the surrounding area. A great fog of shiny particles and rainbow colors blocked everyone's view. If the sniper had not prepared a position and zeroed in on the temple, he would be as blind as the rest.

"I'm going in. Hey sniper, I'll be alternating from the left to the right side of the temple area each minute starting from now."

"Roger that."

With that out of the way, Joshua entered the mist yet again, rendering himself blind. By now, Joshua got used to the sheer amount of visual noise around him. Having prepared his entry with a rudimentary map, he eased his mech forward. Its steps landed softly in the soil, much gentler now that it only wore a fraction of its armor.

Joshua felt more in tune in this blind environment. The Mist Prowler was made for hunting in the heavy fog. Like an extradimensional specter, the sorry-looking and creaky mech approached the temple. As a minute passed, he switched a little to the right. He decided to increase his pace and probe the enemy's disposition.

Once the main temple came into view, a laser shot out at him from a corner.

"Contact!" Joshua yelled as he dodged further to the right. Then he realized the particles in the air blocked all communication signals as well. "Shit."

His mech spurred ahead with a scavenged sword in hand. The spear and heated knives weren't able to survive Joshua's rough handling. More shots to ping in his direction, but luckily they were just exploratory in nature.

Another set of laser shots started to fire from the outskirts. The sniper in Joshua's team finally went into action and focused most of his shorts to the left.

The grand temple came into view. Unlike the other stone ruins in the map, the main structure of the alien city was carved out of an exotic stone that shone bright black in the sun. Its appearance was incongruent with the local architecture.

Joshua cared little for these fictional curiosities and instead focused on getting into sword range with what looked like a banged-up heavy centaur. It lost most of its weapon emplacements from previous attacks. Most notably, one of its legs appeared to be lame.

"It's a sitting duck." He grinned at the sight. The heavy mech did not use any weapon other than what looked like a salvaged laser rifle. The mech's fixed weapon emplacements were either destroyed or expended all of their ammunition.

The heavy mech released a trumpet-like sound in the air as it called for help. Knowing that he didn't have much time, Joshua squeezed out all of the Mist Prowler's potential and dodged the heavy mech's plentiful shots with clumsy grace.

Knowing that its end was near, the heavy mech dropped its rifle and instead lifted off a ridiculous-looking maul from the ground. Even before the Mist Prowler came into range, the centaur already started to swing the hefty weapon.

"Just because my mech looks like scrap doesn't mean it can't dance!"

With contemptuous ease, Joshua bent his mech backwards and allowed the head of the maul to pass right before his mech's nose. After he pulled his mech upright, the sword in its hand made a few quick stabs towards the damaged and wrecked weapon emplacements on the centaur's body. He might as well be stabbing a stationary target, because the centaur's reaction speed was far too slow compared to his Mist Prowler.

The centaur smoked and its reactions slowed down once more. Joshua was disappointed his attacks hadn't wrecked the mech, but he shouldn't be surprised. Heavy mechs often survived heavier punishments. He made do

with merely crippling his opponent because a pair of enemy light mechs finally came to the centaur's aid.

"Two more for the chopping block." Joshua said as his grin grew stronger.

Instead of confronting them directly, Joshua abruptly shifted his mech to the left. He acted as if he wanted to lure the two into a fruitless chase. As planned, the wary light mechs didn't follow him deeper into the mist. Instead, they opted to approach their crippled teammate and assess his condition.

Unfortunately for them, the sniper fire abruptly started pelt them down. One shot even thrust past a damaged shoulder section, cleanly severing the entire arm from the poor mech's frame. None of the mechs present on the battlefield looked pristine. Many mechs missed entire sections of their armor. A single attack at an unprotected opening could prove devastating.

Joshua decisively shed the three mechs and instead dove in deeper and came up on the entrance of the temple. He had to move carefully now that he came so close. Destroying the temple was an automatic loss condition.

A mech suddenly came into his view. The mediumweight looked terrible. Fractured armor was all that was left of its armor, and it had lost its entire right shoulder and arm. Despite the extensive damage, the mech still held on to an intact flamethrower in its other hand.

"A striker!"

One of the ways striker-type mechs distinguished themselves from others was their capability to damage a wide area. Accuracy was less of a concern for them as they'd always hit something in their attacks if they came into range. The particle mist unintentionally provided the striker with the perfect hunting environment.

Joshua chose to push his mech down into a forward roll. The limber mech performed the desperate action with a lot of worrying creaking. Despite the

Mist Prowler's limberness, mechs simply weren't designed to roll. Tons of pressure fell onto several vulnerable spots, causing the mech to run on its final legs.

"I still have enough juice to take you down with me!"

As the striker adjusted his flamethrower downwards, Joshua swiped his sword at the weapon. The strike sliced the weapon apart, causing its hot and unstable internals to explode in a splash of flame that engulfed the both of them. The striker was clearly worse off from the attack, having lost its remaining arm to fire.

Unfortunately, Joshua wasn't feeling all that good. Plenty of flames had gone right past his non-existent armor and savaged his beaten-up internals. He instantly lost 80% of his engine power.

"Come on. Get up!"

With his mech's final strength, Joshua poured all of his will into pushing the Mist Prowler to get on its knees, hold up the sword, and push its battered feet just enough to slash at the opposing mech for one last time.

The attack landed solidly in the enemy's waist. It tore apart the striker's engines, immobilizing it on the ground right next to the Mist Prowler which just breathed its last.

Within the simulation pod, Joshua breathed out as he pulled himself out the intensity of combat. He paid little attention to the remainder of the match. He recalled his previous encounters and relished the stunts he pulled off with the Mist Prowler. His mouth never lost its grin.

"The Mist Prowler is a worthy mech. I wasn't wrong in trusting that designer."

Joshua eventually found out that his team lost the match. In the end, they stayed back too long and let the enemy team run out the clock. It left a bad taste in his mouth, but he quickly regained his composure.

"There's plenty of other opportunities to make up for my loss."

Meanwhile, somewhere else on the planet, Ves looked down at Lucky in concern.

"What's the matter, buddy?"

The cat tugged at his pants and yowled at him to follow him outside. The mechanical cat usually longed about on his sofa. Something must have stirred him up really good for him to act so panicked.

Ves ran after the cat when it bolted out the doors. He stopped when his feet encountered a metal box.

"Ouch!"

After soothing his stubbed foot, he looked down to see Lucky frantically scratching the exterior of the metal box.

"Hey now, be careful with that." He said as he picked up the head-sized box. "Let's head inside."

After sinking back down the couch, Ves studied the strange box that appeared at his doorstep. He hadn't expected any deliveries to arrive today, and certainly not something that warranted a small but heavy metal box. After knocking his hands over the matte surface, Ves realized the box was not as simple as it looked. His knowledge in metallurgy suggested that the box was a piece of reformed mech armor plating.

He turned it around and touched all over its cold surface, only to come up with no way of opening the box. He knew there was something inside because he could feel something clank when he gently shook the container.

"This isn't meant to be opened with a simple cutter." Ves realized with fascination. Who would go through the trouble of refashioning mech armor into a box that could only be opened with specialized tools?

Fortunately, his workshop's tool shed possessed a few tools meant to help with repairs. One of them was a high-intensity thermal cutter that could slowly melt through most mech armor. The only problem was that handling such a tool inexpertly might damage the contents of the box.

"Maybe I should use a saw instead?"

But when Ves studied the box further, he realized that using saws came with its own risks. The armor plates weren't simply stacked on top of each other, but were placed in a particular pattern that could cause the entire box to implode and funnel excess kinetic energy to the middle. It was an ingenious security feature that spoke of a great amount of effort in keeping the contents of the box secure.

"I can't use a saw or a thermal cutter alone. I have to use both."

Though there were more advanced tools that could open the box without risk, they were all in the hands of large or rich manufacturers. A nobody like Ves wouldn't be able to afford such extravagance.

Therefore, Ves simply prepared his tools and carefully worked on the box with Lucky watching on with hungry eyes.

First, he melted the outer portion of the box in a careful pattern. He did not cut a straight line nor did he follow a random route. No, he meticulously followed the optimal routes suggested by the armor pattern and slowly peeled off the top armor layer by layer. He continued his work for two whole hours before he came upon the final layer. It consisted of a different material that was significantly tougher. If Ves recklessly tried to burn through the last layer, he'd risk scorching the contents.

Instead, he left the box in place and let it cool down for a couple of hours. Ves took the time to analyze the samples of the armor plating and scoured the galactic net for any matches.

"Nothing. This alloy is not publically available."

While the armor was nothing special in terms of its damage resistance, Ves was intrigued by the strange patterns the box used. The maker of the box was either a mech designer or a professional armorer.

While Ves made plenty of scans and other observations, he had no starting point in understanding its features. The tech was too advanced or exotic. It might even have alien roots, seeing that the patterns incorporated many strange patterns that resembled alien scripts.

After the box had sufficiently cooled down, Ves took up the powered saw and carefully guided it to cut a tiny groove at the edge of the box. He then followed up with a couple of other minor cuts that caused the final layer of the box to suffer a crisscross of narrow indentations. Once Ves applied the final cut, he turned off the saw and put it on the table. With his free hand, he held his hand over the top, and firmly pushed against the surface.

A series of clicks sounded as the top disintegrated into a mish-mash of weird non-Euclidian shapes. It strained his mind when he looked at the many shapes. Somehow, the remnants of the last layer didn't fall down, but instead fell into a series of grooves that turned out to be a sophisticated lock.

When the metal pieces all fell into place, the strange lock turned transparent and changed into a fluid!

"What the?!"

Ves suddenly got knocked aside when Lucky climbed on top of the box. The cat quickly craned down his neck and lapped at the transparent liquid.

"What are you doing, Lucky!? It might be dangerous!"

It took a lot of effort for Ves to use his meager strength to pull his deranged cat from the box. The cat yowled excruciatingly and used all of the power packed in its slim body to slip out of his owner's grip and dive right back into the box.

When Ves tried to pry off his disobedient cat from the box, he failed to make any progress. The cat practically dug in its claws.

"Lucky, don't make me upgrade my strength."

Apparently, the gem cat didn't care. By the time Ves managed to pull his cat off, it already closed its eyes in lazy contentment. Ves looked speechlessly at the empty interior of the box before turning his gaze at his selfish cat. Lucky looked so full of himself right now. He even had the audacity to nap in his irate owner's grasp!

Ves sighed. With the strange liquid alloy slurped away, he could find no other clue to the providence of the box. While he still had the rest of the opened box to play with, it paled in comparison to the strange and magical alloy. It almost seemed as if the alloy moved by itself.

"I hope you're happy with your latest meal, because I'm not going to feed you anything until you completely emptied your bowels."

Lucky graced the admonishment with a lazy meow before finally falling asleep. Ves sighed, not having the heart to scold his cat any longer. Instead, he put the cat down onto the couch and turned his attention back to the opened box.

"Does it have any other secrets?"

Chapter 54: Going Out

Ves lacked the advanced equipment necessary to make sense of the open box. The materials incorporated in its construction were intricately exotic in

nature, which meant their attributes weren't in any public databases. With only limited measurements to go on, Ves was no closer into figuring out the origin of the box. Even studying the strange patterns the creator of the box had used presented no results.

"My starting point is too far behind. I can't make sense of anything even if I have better equipment."

From what limited data he could gather, the box came from an extraordinary source. Nothing in the Bright Republic or elsewhere in this star sector could produce something so magical.

"This is actually an application of modular armor."

The realization stunned him. Not for its magical properties, but for the motives the sender of the package held.

There was someone out there that kept an eye on Ves. He or she knew about Lucky and came up with a highly unusual material to feed the cat. The unknown observer also knew about the Mist Prowler, for why else would he receive a box made out of modular armor?

"Who is it?" Ves asked himself, worried that his secrets were bared open all this time. He obsessively took out a scanning tool and scoured every corner of his workshop for cameras and other spying tools.

Nothing.

But that left out only one way of spying. His equipment such as his 3D printer and his assembler were second-hand. If someone messed with the intricate machines, Ves had no way of finding out as he wasn't a specialist in designing industrial equipment. Perhaps some spying methods had even infiltrated the software he used.

This incident reminded him that there were forces out there that could stomp on Ves like a bug. Despite his recent accomplishments, he was still vulnerable to outside manipulation. From what he could gather, the box could only come from two possible sources.

"It's either the creators of the Mech Design System or my father."

Thinking about his missing dad choked Ves up. He missed Rycol's steady influence. His father was the bedrock in which Ves pulled himself back together and switched his aspirations from piloting a mech to designing them. He couldn't imagine what sort of deeds his father committed in order to get his hands on the priceless System.

"There's too many secrets involved with the System." Ves reaffirmed, having gotten over the unpleasant implications of receiving this gift. "I can't be too complacent. Whoever let the System fall into my hands can easily take it back."

He put aside the box and left it in a secure storage area. It wasn't as if he wanted to spend more time, but he could not get any better results in a short time. With a possible order for his Marc Antony arriving soon, Ves wanted to make some quick gains in his skills in order to improve his products.

Having just released the Mist Prowler variant in the virtual market, Ves was flush with fresh DP. He quickly acquired the Speed Tuning II subskill that he had his eye on for a while. The unlocking of knowledge hidden deep within his mind went smoothly as he had experienced the sensation several times before. His mind had definitely adapted to high-density information transfers.

His ability to squeeze out more speed from a mech had improved. Speed tuning mostly look at optimizing the layout of artificial muscles. With this new perspective, Ves already thought of a couple of ways he could tweak the Mist Prowler's performance.

"It's not a good idea to go back to my old design. I'm better off designing another variant."

While his Mist Prowler was on the market for only a few days, the sales figures looked dismal. The variant's performance was decent, but it cost significantly more than the base model. Most Silver League players settled for something that was good enough instead of throwing their money for the very best machine.

What also didn't help was that Ves lacked a firm brand. Not many people opted to put their trust in an unknown designer. A couple of 1-star designs under his belt didn't make him stand out at all in the crowded mech market. As Iron Spirit offered many poor designers a viable way of earning money with just a modest amount of investment, the lower end of the virtual market was flooded with cheap mechs of questionable quality.

"I can only slowly build up my brand. None of my mechs are crappy if you leave out my first one. All of my designs are mechanically sound and feature unique strengths."

Just having a sound design wasn't enough to stand out. He needed to show off real strength. The Mist Prowler was just the first step in his plan. Its exceptional agility and speed as well as its remarkable performance in the later stages of a lengthy match should impress anyone who fought against it. Perhaps the sales of his latest mech might pick up in the coming days.

In any case, Ves could not afford to hang back and wait for the market's reactions. With his improved ability to design faster mechs, he already envisioned a new project for him to tackle. Still, after having finished a fairly complicated project, Ves wanted to take a day off to relax.

He took a last look at his sleeping cat before he locked the workshop and left the premises. His summoned aircab arrived at his doorstep within a minute.

After entering the vehicle, Ves activated his comm and looked up his available funds.

So far, Ves was left with about 2 million credits in spending money. A much larger portion of money was safely stashed in his bank account, waiting to be spent on major investments in a couple of years.

"I shouldn't splurge all of my money too quickly. I still need to keep a reserve for any virtual licences that catches my fancy."

He decided to go on a shopping trip. His aircar sped past stately homes and winding parks. Cloudy Curtain might not feature the best weather, but the local residents made up for it by beautifying their neighborhoods. Bright flowers and lively trees dotted the streets as the residents leisurely gossiped with each other or brought their kids out to play.

Ves smiled as he looked down at the sights. This was his home. Rittersberg possessed a much greater heritage, and Bentheim was the economic center of the Republic. Nonetheless, Cloudy Curtain possessed its own unique charm. Peace was everywhere and one could escape from the wider struggles of the galaxy by settling at one of the planet's many plots of land.

Cloudy Curtain was neither too poor nor too rich. If one could name one vice, it was that most residents were rather lazy and unambitious. As a second-generation resident of Cloudy Curtain, Ves was keenly aware of this difference. No other local mech designer would have the guts to start a mech business by themselves. They were too content to go with the flow.

"Father, where the hell are you?" Ves sighed again. Rycol Larkinson always behaved as if he was driven, just like the rest of his notable family.

The aircar finally touched down at a quiet but upscale commercial street in the center of Freslin. The city was the second-largest metropolis on the planet, though in galactic standards it was just a slightly larger town. In any case, the

workshop was located in the furthest suburbs of Freslin, so Ves found it much more convenient to travel here rather than the capital on the other side of the planet.

His first stop was the local branch of the Sanyal-Ablin Security Solutions. SASS was one of the pre-eminent security companies in the local star sector. It somehow managed to establish a firm market presence in both the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom. That led to many suspicions, but the Commerce Minister of the Republic himself vouched for the company.

As Ves wanted to shore up his workshop's anemic security, he went for the best. You couldn't get any better than SASS. After he stepped inside, an attractive, dark-skinned female attendant walked over. Both of them exchanged handshakes.

"Welcome to Sanyal-Ablin, Mister Larkinson. You can call me Robyn. I'm the head security consultant of the Freslin Branch. I'll be attending to your needs this afternoon."

While Ves was surprised with the woman's age, he was more interested in the mention of his name. "You know who I am?"

"How can we not?" She smiled. "Your face was plastered all over the news a few weeks back when you won silver in Bentheim."

Ves thought that such a small accomplishment would quickly be forgotten by the masses. Did he underestimate the fame he earned when he achieved second place in the Fusion Cup?

"Well Robyn, as you can probably guess, I'm here to invest in security for my business. Can we talk?"

"Certainly."

After exchanging greetings, the woman led him to a small and richly furnished conference room. Ves took a random seat while Robyn set down a cup of coffee on the table in front of him. The security consultant pressed down the table, allowing a projector to beam a bunch of marketing material in front of him. It listed all the standard services the company provided.

"As a small business owner, we can offer you a limited selection of services. I doubt your annual revenue surpasses a billion bright credits, so we can leave the enterprise solutions off the table."

Ves nodded at the sensible selection. "I don't intend to scale up my production. My earnings will not be growing dramatically, though I hope it will stay steady. For now, I only hope to make my workshop more secure from spies and burglars. Let alone rogue mechs, right now, any drunkard can climb over my fence."

"Ah, so you wish to make a major investment into your cyber security and a minor investment in perimeter security." Robyn lifted a couple of fingers to push away most of the options in the projection. Most of the solutions that remained different substantially in price. "What is your budget?"

"I'd like to start with about five hundred thousand, but with the option of upgrading my choice later on when my business starts to pick up in perhaps a half year or a year."

One of the lower-end options dominated the screen. Robyn pointed her finger at the most notable features of this package.

"The Cyber-Robo service that we offer can protect your premises both digitally and in reality. We offer a standard suite of hardware and software security solutions to protect your intellectual property from opportunistic virtual attacks. You can always upgrade or downgrade this ongoing service at your leisure."

"Hm, that sounds great. What about protection from outside my doorstep?"

"We can offer you a team of four mechanical patrol bots to establish a basic perimeter guard. We can not offer you direct control over their programming, but we do allow you to designate priorities. You can designate an area that they must guard at all costs for example."

"What kind of armament will they carry?"

"The bots are licensed to carry anti-personnel and light anti-vehicle weapons. It won't stop even a light mech, but they can and will shoot down any aircars crashing in your direction. If you happen to upgrade your contract with a couple of million credits, we can augment your guard with a pair of our proprietary Arcbots. They possess enough firepower to fend off a light mech long enough for the Planetary Guard to respond."

The options on the table weren't to his satisfaction. Ves wanted a more substantial guard to have some piece of mind. Sadly, he wasn't made of gold, so he had to do with what his budget could withstand.

"I'll take the basic Cyber-Robo option."

The two hammered out the details within an hour. Within a week, a couple of technicians and security consultants would visit his workshop and start to implement his chosen security plan. Besides designating a couple of sections of his workshop that he wanted to protect the most, the people of SASS could take care of the rest.

Ves left the branch office with a lighter step. Though he spent five hundred thousand credits in one go, the extra safety he got in return allowed him to ease one worry off his mind.

"Once my business rises in value, I have to increase my security spending. I can't end up as a fat lamb ready for slaughter."

As Ves only recently started his company, he wasn't worth gobbling up. With the System's help, that could change fast. Once his skills improved and his

mech designs incorporated a couple of unique strengths, Ves might be inundated with offers. Some of them may not come with kind intentions.

Chief among them was Walter's Whalers. As the local bullies of Cloudy Curtain, they took a modest cut out of every company's earnings. They were rather mild as far as gangs went. Cloudy Curtain was just too small for them to squeeze with any force. If they acted too heavy handedly, then no business would be willing to operate in their territory.

Therefore, the next destination of his trip brought him to one of their outposts near Freslin. The dilapidated-looking mech base only serviced a single squad of mechs, but Ves didn't underestimate the local organization one bit.

A bored guard sat right next to the gates, staring at the colorful clouds in the sky. "Who's there?"

"I'm a new business owner. I'd like to meet with the boss of this place."

That perked up the sleepy man. "Oh, so its money business, eh? You can go straight ahead. I'll call in the little boss."

Little boss? Confused, Ves stepped inside and walked straight towards the barracks up ahead. Much like the rest of the base, the structure looked as if it had seen better days. Ves thought it likely that the base used to be occupied by the Mech Corps. The lack of any value extracted from the local star system prompted the Bright Republic to scale down its local presence and allocate their resources to richer planets.

After Walter's Whalers took over planetary security, they clearly didn't value proper maintenance as much as the Republic's armed forces. Ves even saw a pile of wrecks stuffed in a corner. He lamented the enormous waste. If they hadn't been so exposed to the elements, a designer like himself could salvage much of the parts and cobble up a couple of cheap but functional mechs. He already had experience doing so in the Fusion Cup.

"Hey, wassup man?" A hand clapped his back from behind, giving the frail mech designer a fright.

He turned around and met his gaze with a handsome blond that matched his age. The young man looked similar to the elite pilots he encountered in the YTE. He wore a sweaty piloting suit, which made it clear the man just finished practice.

"I'm Ves Larkinson. Are you the.. Little boss?"

"Sure thing. And before you ask, I'm Dietrich, Walter's second son." The man grumbled a bit as he swiped his messy hair.

Ves straightened up a little as he realized he was facing a genuine big shot rather than just a sub-boss. Dietrich scanned over his body perceptively and dismissed any potential threats. A skinny guy like Ves could never overpower a trained mercenary.

"So you came for business, right?"

"Yes. I don't want any misunderstandings to occur between us as my business starts to grow."

Dietrich grinned and thumped his chest with his fist. The force behind the casual action could knock Ves right out his feet. "Don't worry Larkinson, us Whalers don't mistreat our own. I'm kind of thirsty right now, so come with me. I know a nice joint that has the best imported drinks in town."

Before he knew it, Dietrich dragged Ves to his personal aircar. The pimped out vehicle was some kind of luxury model Ves was not very familiar with, but he appreciated its sleek design. Dietrich didn't engage the autopilot. Instead he took personal control and raced out of the parking lot with the speed of a missile. The G-forces alone pushed Ves back into his chair.

"Could you please ease off a little? I'm not a pilot!"

"Oh, sorry bout that." Dietrich nonchalantly replied and stopped accelerating. "I got too excited for a moment. I'm meeting up with my sweethearts, you see."

"Er.. no worries.." Ves trailed off, wondering what he got himself into.

Chapter 55: Protection

After a short trip that went way over the speed limit, the aircar finally landed in a more sleazy part of town. A handful of rough-looking potentates wearing pilot suits congregated together on the cracked streets. As for the norms or non-pilots, they all toted some form of gun or rifle on their bodies. Ves was marginally reassured they kept the weapons securely holstered.

"Welcome to the Whalers' second hangout!" The little boss introduced the streets to Ves. "We own the entire neighborhood here. You can get almost anything you want, for the right price. Whether it's chems, girls or games, we've got you covered!"

"Thanks, but I'm okay." Ves replied simply as he kept his answers short. He was scared that if he said anything more, the pilot might drag him somewhere murkier.

Fortunately, Dietrich led Ves into the classiest-looking structure. The nightclub was in its low period due to the daytime hour, but the couple of regulars drinking at the bar showed that it was a favored hangout to the younger generation. A pair of doll-like girls shrieked and left the young pilots they previously curried for favors.

"Welcome back little boss!" They greeted him and smooched both sides of his face with kisses.

"Hahaha, hang on for a moment! Jemry, Kayden, this is Ves. Serve something up for him, will ya?"

"Sure thing boss."

As the two girls left Dietrich's side and hopped over the bar, the little boss gestured Ves to sit at a stool. When they seated themselves, Dietrich waved at a projector that was showing a news broadcast and changed it to an archived footage of the Fusion Cup. The faces of Ves and Charlotte were clearly displayed as they received their silver medallions.

"So, is that you up there?"

Ves nodded. He didn't know whether it was a good thing the Whalers knew about his recent accomplishment. Fame wasn't always a good thing if it attracted the bad kind of attention. Attracting the eyes of a mercenary gang often led to unsavory paths.

"Haha great!" Dietrich laughed and slapped the mech designer's back with the force of a punch. "We finally have our own mech designer! The days where we pilot crappy outdated mechs will be history!"

Ves awkwardly coughed. "I think you overestimate my capabilities. I've only started my business a few months ago. My mech boutique's production volume will remain small as I'm focused on producing high-end mechs."

That dampened Dietrich's enthusiasm. "So you're not setting up a large manufacturing plant on Cloudy Curtain?"

"The cost of doing such a thing is prohibitive. And even if I have the money, without a rep my mechs won't sell very well."

Ves could see the gears turning in Dietrich's head. Despite his playboy appearance, the little boss was not a wastrel.

"Alright. Understood. It's too much to hope that a major industry will start up in this quiet backwater."

"Bentheim is near enough for most of this planet's needs."

"Yeah, but anything we buy from there means we have to pay a big cut to the gangs in control of that place." Dietrich took a deep breath. "Alright, let's change gears. Let's talk about what you can do right now. Are you producing any mechs?"

"Only one design so far, based off a lastgen mech. I just completed my first sale a short time ago."

When Ves threw the files of his model to Dietrich, the little boss studied the information carefully. He ran over the spec sheet of the Marc Antony with practised familiarity.

"The specs are kind of good, and the price is rather decent. Shame it's a lastgen mech though. I wouldn't buy anything lastgen now that the big switch is happening within a decade."

"I don't have much choice in the matter. I've received the base model as a grant. It's the only way an independent mech designer like me can get a foot in the market."

While the Marc Antony's virtual combat footage impressed Dietrich somewhat, he just couldn't get over the outdated technology of the frame. Ves realized that he wouldn't be the only pilot who thought that way.

Plenty of his potential customers took longevity into account when they bought a new mech. For the poorer mercs, a mech represented their livelihood for at least two decades if they chose their assignments carefully. The only way Ves could tempt these penny pinchers into buying his mech was if he slashed the price.

"Right, for now, just do your own thing." Dietrich finally said, as if he was ordering a subordinate. "When you manage to come up with a more modern design, you should start to pay us back for our generous protection. Don't worry, we won't let any trouble fall in your way in the meantime."

Ves was smart enough to read the underlying intentions of that statement. Dietrich's interest in Ves lay more in his mech production capability than his earnings. Walter's Whalers considered him and his workshop as one of their own pretty much, and won't allow any other gang to lay a claim.

The offer of protection was not delivered in a sarcastic undertone. Small-time planetary gangs like the Whalers often provided genuine protection to the businesses they held an interest in. It was a way of legitimizing their underground rule and put themselves in the good books of the local government.

As to why the Mech Corps didn't kick these gangs off their thrones and took charge of planetary security by themselves? It was impossible to eradicate the criminal underbelly in any civilized settlement. Rather than engage in an endless war of attrition, the Bright Republic decided to tolerate these shady mercenary gangs and let them fight for turf among themselves. As long as they didn't went overboard and caused mass civilian casualties, the government was willing to turn a very blind eye.

Naturally, Ves realized such offers of protection came at a cost. He nodded his head at Dietrich. "I'll be sure to repay your generosity once I've expanded my business."

The pair spent the next hour trying out drinks and chatting with the two girls. Well, Dietrich did most of the drinking and flirting. Ves sat at his side trying to sip as little alcohol as possible.

Once he finally managed to squirm from the little boss' grip, Ves hailed an aircar and went straight home. Somehow, Ves lost the mood to hang out in Freslin any further.

After returning home to an empty workshop and a sleeping gem cat, Ves sank down his sofa and sighed. "It's a good thing I've come with an accord with Walter's Whalers."

Unlike mech pilots, a designer like Ves lacked the power to protect himself and his assets. His pathetic physical stats were on full display today when Dietrich casually thumped his body several times. If Dietrich bumped him a little bit harder, Ves would end up with bruises on his body.

Mech pilots also had it easier when they needed to leave a planet in a hurry. Their main belongings often consisted of a personal mech and anything they could stuff in their cockpit. They could easily board a passing shuttle or transport and zip away from the star system in a jiffy.

As for mech designers, their most valuable assets consisted of heavy, cumbersome industrial equipment. Heavy assets such as a 3D Printer and an assembler system often required days of dismantling and repackaging before they were fit for transport.

If Ves somehow ran afoul of the Whalers, then he could kiss all of his assets goodbye. Even with the System on his back, restarting from scratch was an impossible talk.

Just like Lucky, Ves took a deep sleep that night. Unlike the lazy cat, he had to wake up properly next morning. The experiences yesterday had rekindled the fire that drove Ves to reach the top. He received too many reminders that he was still a nobody in the eyes of others. Without improving his skills and getting a few good designs under his belt, Ves could never break the suppression of others.

He turned back to the drawing board and envisioned his next design. Ignoring the Mist Prowler, Ves instead revisited the base model.

"The Octagon design is fairly fast, but it's still limited to the realities of its medium weight class."

As an urban hunting mech, the Octagon's priorities lay in its agility, not its top speed. While its lighter-than-usual armor allowed it to run briskly, it did not even come close to any records.

What if he made a variant of the Octagon that was capable of moving much faster?

"It'd be a nightmare to all light mechs."

Light mechs boasted unparallelled speed in exchange for thin armor and weak weapons. Though they might strengthen one of the two, it always came in expense of speed. No light mech truly excelled in all three aspects.

In comparison, even the lightest medium mech could crush them in terms of weapons and armor. The only reason why medium mechs couldn't leverage their advantages properly was that light mechs often outran any opponents coming after them. Light mechs always held the initiative in a skirmish.

If a medium mech was able to catch up to a light mech, the tables would turn. However, not everyone could make such a miracle possible. A medium mech possessed a baseline amount of weight. If the mech's internal frame, engines and power reactor got any weaker, then they couldn't even be called medium mechs anymore. At best, their performance resembled light mechs so much that they'd effectively be one.

What Ves had in mind was to design a mech with enough speed to close the distance with light mechs while still maintaining some of the advantages of a heavier weight class. Thus, Ves opted not only for weight reduction, he also wanted to look into short-term burst acceleration methods.

"The only way a medium mech can catch up to a light one is if it has an auxiliary mobility module."

Flying was the easiest and also laziest solutions. Designing a medium flying mech came with so many considerations that Ves might get overwhelmed. Besides, the Octagon's advantages worked best on the ground.

"Looks like I can only turn to boosters." Ves concluded, and visited the booster section in the virtual market.

Iron Spirit offered a decent variety of boosters in the 2-star range. Plenty of wild-eyed inventors came up with booster systems. Not all of them worked as well as their makers had thought. Ves could choose from a lot of cheap but crappy systems, or fork out some serious dough for something that actually worked out decently in the battlefield.

Boosters generally came in two variants.

The slow burners used up energy in a more efficient way. While they were unable to provide a high amount of thrust, any mech that incorporated these boosters enjoyed a substantial reduction in travel time.

The fast burners on the other hand worked in the opposite way. They provided a substantial amount of thrust, but placed very high demands on the kind of fuels they consumed. They were much more expensive to start, but sometimes a sufficient amount of speed trumped all other considerations.

Ves thought the same. He settled for a run-of-the-mill fast burning booster system for 150,000 credits. While the Subomi Accelotron A-2W got stuck with one of the worst names for a booster system, but delivered a respectable amount of speed. The only downside to the system was that it guzzled up a lot of high-energy fuels and lasted only for a short time before the system engaged its forced cooling cycle.

Nonetheless, a smart pilot who engaged his boosters at the right moment could easily overtake an overconfident light mech.

"Now that I've bought the boosters, lets see how I need to accommodate the frame."

The boosters were only responsible for closing the distance after spotting an enemy light mech. What could give the Octagon a more durable way of moving fast was to pull the oldest trick in the book.

"I'll have to shed some weight off the frame."

A clever choice of reducing weight could make the Octagon retain most of its effectiveness while making it substantially faster. However, such a thing was not that easy to do. The designers of the base model already worked hard in offloading excess weight. For Ves to do it again meant he'd have to make some tradeoffs.

"First, the armor could use some trimming. If I want to save weight and maximise the utility of my variant's armor, then I should stick with the stock armor instead of opting for the more exotic modular armor."

The default armor the Octagon sported served its purposes well enough. Ves only needed to do some tweaking to its armor design in order to emphasize the speed aspect. While it was nice to increase the mech's speed once it accumulates more damage, if the armor had already shrunk a bit, a modular system somewhat lost its purpose.

"I can also do something about the energy cells. I can exchange the mech's high endurance for something else."

He sketched a new energy storage scheme where he cut off a couple of cells in order to make space for the boosters. Some energy cells provided the specialized fuels for the new system.

"Now I'll have to place the boosters in a couple of good locations."

You couldn't just slap a few boosters in a few random spots and call it a day. A badly-placed booster could easily unbalance or even topple over a mech. Ves chose to employ six of the Accelotrons and place them somewhat evenly onto his new design's back. He could figure out the precise placements later with the help of the System's tools.

"Hm, what should I do with the mech's agility?"

Does the Octagon need to keep its limbs nimble and flexible? It was not necessary for a light mech hunter to possess exceptional agility. Merely speed and power was enough for such mechs to smash light mechs into pieces. Nevertheless, the number one strength of the Octagon was its enormous range of motion.

If Ves eliminated this aspect entirely, he'd end up with variant that lost its roots to the base model. The decisions involved with this aspect paralyzed him for a time.

Chapter 56: Streak of Red

Speed changed a lot of things when applied differently to mechs.

A heavy mech that weighed many tons treated speed like rare animals. Even if their engines doubled in size, the effective increase in speed only amounted to just a dozen percent. Most heavy mechs didn't bother with increasing their speed.

On the other hand, a light mech normally lived for speed. Designers often clenched their teeth when they traded off little bits of speed for additional weapons and armor. They often considered this exercise the most painful one imagine, akin to pulling out one's teeth.

Ves felt as if his entire jaw ached as he firmly cut off portions that made the Octagon strong in the first place. He carefully removed bits of armor here and

there while thinning other portions. By the time five days had passed, Ves looked bloodshot at a mech that appeared about 30% thinner than usual.

"I can't do this anymore. I've practically skinned this Octagon to the bone. I can hardly call it a medium mech now."

The new variant's armor took a substantial hit. Though it gained a generous boost in speed and agility in return, it ceased to be a frontline unit. It lacked both the endurance and armor to compete against regular frontline mechs.

The only thing about the armor scheme he left adopted from the Mist Prowler was incorporating a bit of FlexiPlate around the joints and fittings. The flexible armor weighed relatively little, and the joints only required a handful of armor to cover up against most incidental damage. While it wouldn't survive a direct blast, it was better than nothing.

"Now, for the boosters."

As Ves wanted his light mech hunter to close the distance to their prey in one giant dash, he opted to utilize six boosters instead of less. Though it consumed a lot of fuel, all but the lightest armed mechs were in the variant's grasp.

The exact placement of the boosters was kind of tricky. As mechs emulated the human running form, they varied the alignment of their backs when doing different activities. While keeping the back upright was the most efficient way to move in simple runs, most mechs often had to move under enemy fire. The very human tendency to bend forward and keep your head down was a very natural reaction, but one that also stood in the way of good booster management.

Though the nozzles came with a limited range of movement, they could only do so much work. What Ves intended to do was to embed his six boosters in a simple rectangular pattern onto the back. While he could have used more

complicated shapes such as a pentagon with a middle booster or a hexagon without one, such designs fared poorly when damaged.

He put the placement of the boosters around the center of gravity, with a slight downward shift. This subtle effect caused the mech to tilt a little upwards when the boosters burned at full force. Ves aimed to achieve such an effect so that the mech could traverse forwards with lighter footsteps, making it easier to go over uneven terrain.

If he went the opposite direction and allow the boosters to push the mech downwards, then they gave it a much better grip. This let the mech take sharper turns at the cost of a reduced speed and increased stresses on the frame.

"While better control over the direction is nice, it's not worth it if my mech loses too much speed. Since the priority is to close the distance from point A to point B as fast as possible, then it's better to go for straight-line acceleration."

In essence, Ves turned his variant into a rocket. One that was really good for flying in a somewhat straight line and nothing else. He figured the mech should have enough grip to make last second turns in case its target abruptly dodged.

Once he finished working on the boosters, he took a step back and looked at his light mech killer. While it should largely function as envisioned, Ves thought it lacked a certain punch.

"The Octagon's default spear looks kind of skinny."

The spear was meant for opportunistic stabbings when the Octagon moved wildly from side to side. In order to facilitate penetration, the shape of the spear was as thick and pointy as possible. Overall, it looked like an oversized toothpick.

Such a slim design did not fit with his current design. If his mech engaged its boosters and caught up with a light mech, the incredible momentum behind its spear thrust could easily lose control over its weapon by over penetrating the opening blow. Not only would the spear sink in too deep, the damage was also limited as most of the damage was concentrated in a small area instead of being spread out from the point of impact.

Letting the spear keep its current shape wasted a perfectly good opportunity to deal a hammering blow. He edited the spear's design to make the shaft sturdier and the spearpoint a little broader. Now that Ves applied these quick changes, the spear was able to transfer kinetic energy better at the moment of impact.

The variant design now neared its completion. Still, Ves thought it lacked a certain amount of presence. Right now, it merely looked like an overly-slimmed down medium mech. He did not want to give his variant a wimpy appearance.

Aesthetics mattered. Plenty of mechs with mediocre specifications got sold everyday due to looking good.

"I forgot to include the Festive Cloud Generator as well."

Ves really liked the effect of the cloud generator. Not only did it add a little flair, it also acted as a badge for his home planet. Other pilots from Cloudy Curtain should instantly recognize what he had done, and were hopefully more inclined to buy his virtual mechs as a result.

In his view, he had two choices to place his cloud generator. The most distinct features of his variant was its boosters and its spear.

"If I place the cloud generator on the back, it'd be kind of boring. It also draws needless attention to the rear. The last thing I want to do is place a psychological suggestion that enemies should focus on attacking its back."

Instead, he turned to the rather interesting challenge of incorporating the cloud generator in a spear. Ves made some estimates and found that it was possible if he chose the slimmest cloud generator. He could incorporate the main generator in the handle of the spear without affecting the spear's front integrity. However, the spear wouldn't look very cool if the butt end of the spear released vapor.

So Ves edited the spear's design again and led a small and narrow line from the back of the spear all the way to the front. The integrity of the spear wasn't affected too much if the tunnel was carved in the middle of the shaft. He added a number of small exhausts right behind the spearhead.

Inspired by the unique look of a certain style of ancient spears, Ves dyed the vapor in a bright red color. Backdropped by the black spear and silver chrome mech, the red should make for a powerful contrast when the machine charged forward.

"Kind of like a knight, though a poorly armored one at that."

When Ves inputted his mech in a couple of simulation, he found himself impressed. The mere addition of that streak of red dramatically enhanced the presence of the mech. When the machine charged forward with its boosters employed to their maximum, the mech resembled an unstoppable meteor. It was a much more flattering look than the unstable rocket-like appearance the action previously resembled.

In order to enhance this illusion, Ves coated the mech's frame with a couple of colorful red streaks. The additional touch also distinguished his new variant from the base model, so people wouldn't confuse it with a regular Octagon.

"I think that's it. Well System, what do you think?"

[Design Evaluation: Speed Demon.]

Variant name: O-225CS Speed Demon

Base model: Octagon O-225C

Original Manufacturer: Globe-Elstar Corporation

Weight Classification: Extreme Medium-Light

Recommended Role: Anti-Light Mech

Armor: D+

Carrying Capacity: F

Aesthetics: B

Endurance: C-

Energy Efficiency: C

Flexibility: A-

Firepower: E-

Integrity: C-

Mobility: A-

Spotting: D+

X-Factor: E-

Deviance: 30%

Performance improvement: 7%

Cost efficiency: -14%

Overall evaluation: The Speed Demon provides an alternative piloting style that does not fully live up to its concept. Too much performance has been sacrificed in order to achieve the desired speed and impact damage.

[You have received 5 Design Points for completing an original design.]

[You have received 100 Design Points for designing a mech with a trace of X-Factor.]

"Shit."

The Speed Demon as he named it did not perform as well as he envisioned. While it differed drastically from the base model, it did not offer a superior performance if comparing their respective performances in the battlefield. In other words, the speed demon was different, not better. Having come off from designing the Mist Prowler with a small but clear improvement in performance, Ves thought he let himself down.

"I shaved off too much armor. In hindsight, I should have picked a more appropriate armor system that performs better when applied thinly."

Ves wanted to avoid spending more of his dwindling credits than he already had, so he declined to purchase yet another system. The boosters were bad enough. If he kept spending his credits like a garden hose, he'd quickly end up broke to the point where he needed to draw some cash from his piggy bank to make up for the shortfall.

"Even the X-Factor is a little weaker than in my last mech."

He already felt as if this aspect wasn't as good as his last one. Ves clearly enjoyed designing the formidable and unique-looking Mist Prowler. The challenges he faced in forming and optimizing its modular armor scheme were fulfilling.

In comparison, the Speed Demon was more of an exercise in frustration. He gnawed his teeth many times trying to find a way to shed weight without paying too much for the loss. The negative emotions must have influenced the intent he put into his design.

All in all, Ves learned a lesson with his latest design. He shouldn't bite off more than he could chew if he wanted to earn lots of DP.

"Still, I learned quite a bit from this experience. I've gained a much better appreciation of the difficulties involved in forcibly increasing the speed of a mech."

Despite the disappointing performance of the mech, it worked well enough to be put on the

virtual market. Like all his designs, Ves priced the Speed Demon as low as possible without making a loss. As he wanted to maximize his DP gains, he gave up on making any credits from the sales of his mechs in Iron Spirit.

"My second commission should be coming soon. I wonder how long Marcella plans to wait before passing me another order."

He could only be patient and trust his broker to pull through with her search for clients. So far, from what he heard, the Phoenix Cry acquitted itself well in its first real combat operation. At the very least, Captain Caruthers hadn't called back and hollared his ears off. The mech was technically sound.

A week had passed during the time Ves designed the Speed Demon. That was enough time for Ves to receive his scheduled security upgrades. A number of heavily armed shuttles shuttles bearing the markings of Sanyal-Ablin Security Services arrived from Freslin to his workshop. Technicians, security experts and many loading bots debarked from the vehicles and started unloading their gear. Robyn greeted Ves at his doorstep.

"Your Cyber-Robo package has arrived. We'll be taking around a day to set it all up. Do we have permission to scan your workshop and dive into your software? If you wish to keep some files confidential, I can give you time to make backups."

"I've already done so. Feel free to take apart my computers. Just put them back together when you're done."

In truth, Ves kept pretty much all of his sensitive design files in his Mech Designer System. While he was pretty much putting all of his eggs in one basket, at least he had full control over it at all times.

Under the watchful eye of Ves, the experts of the SASS went to work with care. While the loader bots started to place sensors, electric fencing and other nifty gadgets, the human personnel scoured the workshop for any nefarious devices.

"Our team reports nothing untoward has been detected so far, Mr Larkinson."

That lifted a weight off his back. "That's reassuring."

He was not in the clear yet. When the experts finished scanning the rooms and hallways, they started to inspect his gear. His computer terminal where he did most of his virtual work was taken apart. The computer expert carefully scanned each and every chip, cable and even the screws. Then he put it back together and started the terminal up. Using his own specialized software, he man carefully dug deep within the terminal's data.

"I've detected a couple of dormant vulnerabilities." The expert said. "I've taken care of them all."

Ves wasn't too worried about that. He only used his terminal to perform research and access Iron Spirit's market interface. Any hacker who got into his computer system could only read his browsing history. As for using his account to login to Iron Spirit, the game didn't allow anyone to login without a second process of verification, such as a neural pattern scan.

Ves left the computer nerd to his work and instead visited the main work hall. Most of the security experts were present here.

With the help of their own disassembly bots, they took the 3D printer and assembler apart. They tediously went over each part and noted any abnormalities. So far, the only deviations from the standard that they found

could be chalked to wear and tear. A pair of other computer experts scoured the software of the systems for any irregularities.

Fortunately, they found nothing serious. The only problems they found were non-standard repairs for broken parts and a few odd software tweaks that raised performance at the risk of more malfunctions. These modifications were left from the previous owner of the machines. As they didn't intentionally sabotage the complex machines, Ves opted to keep them as they were. He only planned to keep them for a decade at most.

Chapter 57: Ominous Warnings

As Miss Robyn from the SASS supervised the work, she also approached Ves for a talk.

"As a mech designer, when do you think we will switch to the next generation?"

Taken aback by the question, Ves needed a moment to think through his answer. "It won't happen too soon. We can milk our current generation for at least 10 years. We mech designers don't like to see the value of our work plummet before we extracted as much value out of it as possible. I'm sure the big manufacturers are colluding to keep this generation alive as long as possible."

The security consultant nodded. "That fits with our internal assessment. However, the new technologies employed by the advanced states have already leaked out a little bit. We do not believe the mech industry can stand in the way to progress very long."

"Why are you asking about this? Are you planning to upgrade your security hardware?"

"For sure, and more besides that. You may not have heard about this seeing as you're young, but the mech and security markets are at their busiest just before the generational switch."

That sounded strange to Ves. "Why is that so? The new mechs aren't out yet. Why waste their money on goodies that will just turn lastgen a few years later?"

A smirk appeared on Robyn's narrow face. "Oh they aren't investing in new equipment, they are draining their existing stock as they wage wars and engage in high-risk ventures. Consider this. When was the last time the Vesia Kingdom and the Bright Republic went to war?"

"That was about thirty years ago. Right when.. Oh."

Thirty years ago was roughly a decade before the switch to the current generation. The war between both nations were by all accounts brutal, though both sides tried to minimize battles near large population centers. Mech pilots, support troops and logistical personnel suffered the most casualties in that war.

The worst thing about the war was that it ended inconclusively, just like all the previous wars between the two local rivals. A few planets changed hands and a couple of small cities got wiped off the map. The Bright Republic got a little worse off than the Vesia Kingdom, but that didn't prevent the Republic from touting that they held the line against the foreign aggressors.

"As a friend in the industry, I advise you to keep your eyes peeled. The impending conflict might not escalate into a war between states, but you will see plenty of provocations and reprisals in the news. I'm sure the SASS will be exceptionally busy during the coming times, and so will you. If it comes to it, you might find yourself drafted."

That sounded like his worst nightmare. If Ves got pulled away from his workshop, he could not generate any revenue or earn DP. While there were several provisions built into his contracts that allowed him to pause some aspects if the draft came for him, it still didn't leave him with much choice. If he came back years later with no money to invest in new equipment, he'd be stuck with obsolete assets that generated almost no value.

"Luckily I've been awarded with a privileged status. The government shouldn't treat me too poorly."

Robyn looked at him with a skeptical eye. "Don't think you can get a free pass with your award. On the contrary, the bureaucrats value privileged citizens even more. They get assigned to the highest priority missions, which can be good or bad for you. The pay and conditions you receive are generous, but the risks of getting caught under fire is very likely."

Ves already gulped at those words. He wasn't cut out to fight. He had given up his dream of becoming a mech pilot long ago and had fully adjusted to a civilian mentality. Give him a gun and he'd be liable to shoot off his foot.

He also realized he was out of touch with the core Larkinson family. He'd bet Melinda and the other serving pilots in the family already knew about this. Perhaps Melinda assumed he knew as well.

The people of Sanyal-Ablin packed up their gear when they finished beefing up the security. Ves eagerly said goodbye to Robyn and her people as they boarded their much emptier shuttles and flew back to Freslin. Though the people hadn't found anything egregiously wrong, it might happen anytime in the future once he built up a name.

"Speaking of which, when will Marcella deliver the next order?"

In the weeks since he sold his first Marc Antony, he came to enjoy spending money. He wished the ex-pilot turned saleswoman would work a little faster in

managing his sales. He didn't agree to give her a 20% commission for nothing.

"Does she even want the money?"

He declined to pick up his comm and call her personally. It indicated a lack of trust and an abundance of insecurity on his part. He'd wait another week.

"What should I do now?"

His disappointing result from his last design put him in a bad mood. As Ves realized the importance of maintaining a positive outlook when designing a mech, he needed to spend some time doing something else in order to regain his cheer.

"A mech designer is much like an artist in that aspect." He figured as he looked over Lucky as the cat still slept like a log. "If we're not in the mood, we'll always be creating a work that misses the mark."

Everyone considered mech design to be an intricate craft. Though the big transgalactic corporations turned the industry into a mass market, small independent designers still had a chance to compete with the help of the Mech Trade Association.

"Speaking of the MTA, I never really looked into them when I started my business. Perhaps they have some advice for me and my situation."

As Ves had an abundance of free time, he skipped the terminal and instead hailed a aircab to Orinoco, the capital of Cloudy Curtain. The trip lasted a couple of hours due to the time it took to travel from one side of the planet to the other side. If Ves was in a hurry, he could pay for a trip on an entry-reentry shuttle, but the expense wasn't worth it if it only shaved off an hour of travel time.

Having visited the MTA before during his first certification, a receptionist greeted him without fanfare.

"Mr Larkinson, how may I help you?"

"I've been in the business a few months but I'm not entirely familiar with the norms and regulations surrounding mech design and production. Could you have someone guide me with the information that would be most useful to a beginner like me?"

The receptionist pursed her lips. "That is a highly unusual request for our branch. The advisers in Bentheim are much more equipped to address your needs. Hang on for a moment, I'll check with my manager."

After a short wait, the receptionist came back. "The administrative director would like to meet you in his office. He expressed some interest in Cloudy Curtain's first mech producer."

Ves agreed to the request. He figured talking with someone who could call himself a director knew a thing or two about the traditions of the mech industry.

"Am I meeting with Ryan Baldwin again?"

"Ah, no. Mr Baldwin is the officer in charge of combat operations. He's the military leader of our branch."

"Got it."

Led by the receptionist, he entered the lift and rode it to the top of the office building. He exited to a clean and elegant-looking hall. The enormous room took up the entire top floor, and was replete with windows and artwork. Every single nuance of design spoke of privilege and superiority.

"Don't mind the decor." An elderly voice came from the luxurious chair at the other end of the giant office. "It sometimes pays to impress the locals, but I'm sure I don't need to awe you with our association's prestige."

As Ves was not entirely a country bumpkin, he quickly shrug off the oppressive atmosphere. He had seen much worse when he studied in Rittersburg. The capital planet of the Republic reeked of elitism. Compared to his experiences there, the MTA director's office clearly appeared sober and tasteful.

Ves took a seat in the only available chair. He felt like a little schoolboy summoned in front of the principal for a lecturing.

"So you are the young man who bravely started a mech business in Cloudy Curtain. Curious. Can I ask you why you founded your business here rather than in a more developed planet?"

He took deep breath and spoke evenly. "The tax incentives are very attractive here. This is my home, and I'm familiar with the planet. Bentheim is a strange place that I've only stepped foot in once, so I was not inclined to join their crowded mech market. Besides, shipping between the two planets is fast and doesn't cost too much. I'm rather surprised more businesses haven't taken advantage of the friendly business climate here."

"It is because Cloudy Curtain is naked and vulnerable." The administrator spoke as he finally turned around to face Ves. His white-bearded visage gave the distinguished man an authoritative air. From his accent and appearance, he clearly came from a more advanced human state. "The best security this dirtball of a planet can offer is a bunch of criminal mercenaries who are more proficient in drinking themselves to stupor than fending off a serious pirate attack."

The director had a point. As the public port of the Republic, the Mech Corps regarded its security very highly. His cousin Melinda was just one in many thousands in the Planetary Guard. No troublemaker could kick up a storm and get away with it for long.

As for Cloudy Curtain, perhaps a rogue mercenary gang could easily wipe out Freslin and have plenty of time to escape before the authorities got their asses in gear.

"I haven't thought about that, sir." Ves plainly admitted, though he sounded a touch defiant. "I'm not moving my business, though. My mech boutique is tiny. It's not worth robbing."

The older man smiled at him. "You have a backbone at least. That is good. Those who bend too easily in adversity do not make good entrepreneurs. Since you are worth my time, you can call me Justin Chandler. Leave out director or sir."

"Yes, Mr Chandler." Ves replied politely. He relished the chance to question a senior official of the MTA. "I have a couple of questions. Do you mind if I can ask them?"

"Ask away."

"First, do you know any way of obtaining a production license cheaper than what's available on the open market?"

Chandler shook his head. "There are ways, but none that apply to you. Through shortcuts, connections and improper methods, many mech designers have gotten their hands on these licenses. I believe that you yourself have received a couple of old production licenses as grants. Once or twice is okay. But don't base your business model around these easy licences. A successful designer must stand on their own feet and create a completely original design to achieve a lasting presence in the market."

The old man made sense, Ves thought. "But what about component production licenses? They still cost hundreds of millions of credits."

"Is that much? I don't think so. I don't have insight in your accounting, but I am rather sure that this sum won't be a problem for you to acquire. You need to put in the hard work and keep up at it diligently. If you are a good designer, your earnings will reflect that. If you are at a point where you are constantly worrying about being able to pay for licenses and upgrades, then you are just not good enough."

The advice sounded harsh, but true. If Ves was any random mech designer, he might have been cowed. With the assurance of the System, Ves knew he'd outgrow his novice mech designer status any day. He was very confident of his future.

"You're right. I shouldn't worry too much about it. I've only achieved one mech sale so far, but I expect that my sales will pick up. Perhaps I will make a couple of other variants that will enhance my earnings."

"As long as you are not at the end of your rope, you have many opportunities to achieve success."

Ves turned to his next question. "All of my resources come from the MTA's internal market. I'm paying out of my nose for the raw materials required to produce a mech. I've been wondering if you can help me connect with a few suppliers to reduce my expenses."

"You will not attract any fixed suppliers at your scale." Chandler shook his head again. "Unless you have formidable backing or an excellent referral, do not dream of negotiating better terms. The upstream industries think and operate on a scale unimaginable by your standards. A one-man startup like yours does not even qualify a second's worth of attention of their sales department."

"So it's impossible for me to get more favorable prices anywhere?"

"That is not true. You can look closer and look at the local industries in Cloudy Curtain and the surrounding star provinces. This region is poor and undeveloped, which means that most of the local mining and processing is done by small-and-medium enterprises, family businesses and cooperatives. The relative negotiating power between the two of you will be a lot less skewed."

"That.. that could work out, though I won't be able to source the more exotic resources from local suppliers."

"I can send you a list of references to approach some of these suppliers. I'm sure my name will open some doors for you."

The favor Director Chandler bestowed to him was substantial. Ves was deeply appreciative of the gesture. "Thank you, Mr Chandler. That is something I've always wracked my brains about. Receiving your reference helps me avoid a lot of pitfalls."

The two discussed a lot of other, minor topics. Ves and Chandler went over issues such as the production of munitions (bad idea), the cost of insurance (way too much), what to do when getting drafted (demand postponement of debt and any other time-sensitive issues), and more.

The conversation was productive. While Chandler rarely gave out an answer that satisfied Ves, the fog in front of his mech designer career had parted a little. He no longer became mistified when faced with certain questions.

At the end of the meeting, Chandler sent a couple of useful books to his mail. "It pays to read up on the relevant laws. Always remember that mech designers invent killing machines, not glamourous toys. Although it does not look like it, we of the MTA take a very dim view to any mishandling of dangerous weapons."

Ves gulped at that last warning. "Understood. I will be sure to treat my physical products seriously."

"Oh, I'm not worried about you. Instead, I'd keep a closer eye on your friends and associates if I were you."

Whether the advice was of any use in the future or not, Ves didn't know. He said goodbye to the insightful director and slowly left the opulent office. The director kept his sagely eyes on the young designer as he entered the lift and rode it back to the ground floor.

Chapter 58: Profligate

Profligate

Lucky finally woke up the day after Ves visited the MTA. The cat appeared to slink in a satisfying manner, as if he ate the biggest fish in the universe. Ves gave his pet the stink eye.

"So... you got anything to say?"

"Meow."

The cat acted cute and brushed its smooth body against his legs. Ves let go of his irritation and just picked up the cat and hugged him in his arms. It was easy to forgive the loss as he never really owned the strange material in the box to start with. He suspected the advanced alloy may have been meant for Lucky in the first place.

"Do you feel the need to go to the litter box?"

Strangely enough, even after a couple of hours the cat never visited the toilet or his backyard. Ves picked up his cat again and inspected his body closely. Lucky still looked and weighed the same. He started to doubt whether anything really changed. Did the cat just ate a bunch of priceless alloys because it tasted good?

He fed Lucky his usual meal of minerals and let it go out and play. Ves still had work to do.

His harvest from the MTA mainly consisted of directions. He did not gain much knowledge, but he did gain avenues for further study, as well as a couple of books. He went over the three electronic books sent to his mail account.

The three books all consisted of introductions to the laws concerning the production and use of mechs. The books appeared to be prepared by the MTA to give out to young mech pilots and mech designers, so the level of jargon and the depth of topics remained fairly shallow. It was the perfect set of books for Ves to familiarize himself with the laws around mechs beyond the brief lessons he received from his days in college.

The first book revolved around the most important laws that govern the use of mechs in human space. It detailed the history just after the invention of mechs about 400 years ago, and explained how human space grew more chaotic with this advancement in warfare.

The ability of all human states to wage war increased substantially because mechs packed more firepower and mobility while requiring relatively less maintenance than other unit types such as planes, tanks and infantry. It gave smaller nations a chance to stir up trouble against their larger neighbors, but it also allowed these behemoths to crush rebels thoroughly by flattening everything in their way with ease.

War between the human states intensified, with conflicts happening up to five times more than before the invention of mechs. It led to a lot of suffering among the poor. Something needed to be changed.

Naturally, as the book was published by the MTA, it predictably presented it as the savior of mankind. With hardly any explanation of how it came about,

the MTA splashed onto the scene with powerful mechs and warships and suppressed the most gruesome conflicts with an even bloodier fist. Quickly, all the smaller human states got cowed while the larger nations negotiated treaties. The MTA firmly established itself as the arbiter of human conflict.

The rest of the book introduced all the major laws the MTA enforced with vigor. From the prohibition on the use of starships in internal human conflict, to the abolishment of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, pretty much all weapons capable of inflicting mass harm were limited to external defense against aliens. The only thing that really remained untouched were mechs.

Ves found it peculiar why the MTA focused so much on promoting mechs and the technology behind it. They not only encouraged its use in wars, they also supported the industry behind it with licensing laws and certification services. The MTA single handedly changed human civilization to worship mechs.

"For what?" He asked, and was pretty sure he was not alone in asking this question.

Space ships remained the kings of power projection. What use was dominating the surface of a planet when even a middle-sized ship could bombard the hard-won location from above? The warships and the spacers serving on them were the real heroes of humanity. These invisible but vital servicemen defended the borders of human space against alien aggression every day.

Yet hardly any day went past in the news without the mention of this mech or that mech. Many mech pilots stood out from the crowd and even became stars. As for warships, well, Ves could not recall a single name of a person who served on a spaceship. Even the other Larkinsons who all prided themselves as a martial family never got involved in the navy.

He eventually shrugged as he finished the book. "I'm sure there's a story behind it all."

The second book surprisingly dealt with the mech laws in the Greater Terran United Confederation. As a first-rate human superstate, it wielded a disproportionate amount of military power. On paper, it looked like an invincible giant that could treat all outside attacks as pinpricks.

Reality proved many times that they often got the short end of the stick when battling against their eternal rivals. The New Rubarth Empire smashed the Confederation's nose time and time again. The simplest explanations to this occurrence always emphasized the Empire's centralization versus the Confederation's feudal-like power structure.

The real answers involved more than merely governance. As the oldest human alliance, the Confederation always consisted of a gathering of smaller substates. Though they were capable of uniting somewhat against an external aggressor, they spent most of their time and energy overcoming their local rivals. In a way, what happened inside the Confederation's borders pretty much mirrored what was happening outside.

The Terran Confederation's planets and star systems were all fairly old. Lots of people lived there from generation to generation. The cities there not only reached up to the top of the atmosphere, they also dug in many reaches deep into the ground.

You could imagine any conflict that would break out in such a densely populated environment resulted in a devastating loss of life.

As the Terrans tried and failed to curb the widespread use of mechs to settle grudges and the like, they finally came together and figured out a compromise. The entire way of waging internal war turned from a no-holds-

barred total war into a more gentlemanly way of duels and limited engagements.

In short, each star system designated one empty planet or sometimes moon as the system's control area. The entity that controlled the entire planet had legitimate authority over the entire star system.

For example, the ancient entity that ruled over the birthplace of mankind fortified a planet called Pluto. They made an agreement with the entire Confederation that so long as they held this tiny planet, they were entitled to rule over Earth, Mars, Venus, Mercury and the other ancestral planets without any contention. They managed to do so since the founding of the treaty that set these rules.

Naturally, not all of these so-called system rulers managed to withstand the test of time. Many weaker parties got kicked off from their designated defense planet, leading to a change in administration for those respective star systems. In practice, almost nothing changed for the commoners. Warfare got gentrified, and most of the damage and suffering got limited to the military and aristocratic classes.

At the end of the read, Ves found the structure to be enlightening. Though the Terrans warped war beyond all recognition, the damage that resulted from any conflict was fairly minimal. It allowed the Terrans to preserve the majority of its strength while leaving some outlets for local rulers to vent their expansionist urges.

"It's good for the commoners, but I can't say it has done any good for their national culture."

The image the people of other states had of the Terrans was that they were rich, lazy and decadent. They wasted so much wealth on senseless past

times such as playing golf with asteroids or racing in flimsy shuttles in spitting distance to a sun.

Ves closed the second book and turned to the final one. It did not discuss the major laws of the New Rubarth Empire or the Bright Republic, but instead was a more practical summary of what mech designers had to watch out for. He already knew most of the contents inside, such as not incorporating someone else's technology without procuring a license and such. Still, the book also explained some things Ves was not aware of its existence.

For example, the laws concerning the hiring of personnel. Mech designers were entitled to certain privileges that made them kings in their own workshops. They could impose all kinds of restrictions to their personnel, especially their mech technicians. Strict rules existed against leaking proprietary know-how that formed the basis of a mech designer's competitive advantage.

It came to the point where mech technicians and junior mech designers had to choose their employer carefully. A rotten boss could use all kinds of means to pin an employee with a crime. Ves realized he potentially avoided a calamity when he declined to work from the lower rungs of a larger mech corporation.

If he got lucky, he could learn all kinds of tricks under a more experienced designer. But if his luck was lousy, his boss could treat him like a slave and get away with it. Even in the Bright Republic, which prided itself as a bastion of civilization in this barren star sector, the circumstances mech technicians had to face were very tough. Only the technicians from the Mech Corps and from the more generous mercenary corps enjoyed substantial rights.

"It's all about squeezing the maximum amount of value out of their employees. Only the most talented and the most connected get promoted. The rest have to toil for their entire lives in the same position."

That was reality in a universe where automated production with bots and AIs took care of most of the heavy lifting. The MTA already did its best to encourage smaller artisan mech manufacturers to find their footing in this cutthroat industry.

Ves finished the final book at the end of the day. Though his ability to design and fabricate a mech hadn't improved, his comprehension of the workings of the universe deepened. He learned more about the rationale behind some rules and was able to adjust his future direction in light of new information.

He went to sleep and digested the knowledge.

The next day, Ves received some good news. The second order for his Marc Antony finally arrived. Marcella contacted Ves directly for a talk.

"Your newest client is someone.. special."

"Special in what way?"

Marcella looked as if she was constipated. "He's the grandson of the majority shareholder of the Ricklin Corporation. While he has more than enough money to spend around, he has posed quite a few demands. You will need to be flexible and do your best to accommodate his requests if you wish to keep him as a client."

That sounded completely opposite to his first client, who had a practical use for his mech. The Ricklin Corporation was the Bright Republic's main manufacturer of low end processor chips. Practically every cheap bot and household machine featured a chip from Ricklin. While the profit margins of these chips were minuscule, the sales volume was gigantic. The shareholders of the Ricklin Corporation practically sat on a gold mine that churned out billions of credits in dividend each year.

As a descendant of such a rich family, this new client should have very peculiar requests. Fabricating a customized mech for a rich second-

generation brat was not what Ves had in mind when he got into the mech business. Still, money was money, and the customer was king.

"I understand. I suppose he wants to meet me?"

"Right. You'll have to take a trip to Bentheim. I've taken care of all the scheduling and reservations. If you aren't occupied with anything, I'd like you to embark on the next inter-system shuttle."

"I can leave for Bentheim immediately."

Ves quickly packed up a bunch of clothes and some other knickknacks. He called out Lucky and together they boarded a priority shuttle that swiftly brought them to the spaceport.

As Marcella already booked him on a priority flight, Ves had no trouble getting on board a small, luxury transit shuttle. It was a medium-sized passenger vehicle that regularly shipped businessmen and well-off tourists from Cloudy Curtain to Bentheim and back.

Though Ves looked a little out of place among the throng of middle-aged men and women, he casually leaned back against his comfortable seat and activated the projector in front of him to distract himself from the space flight. Lucky hung on his shoulder, sleeping yet again, the lazybones.

He decided to dig up some news about his upcoming client and the the Ricklin Corporation.

The Ricklin Corporation listed in the top 50 of the Bright Republic's stock exchange. Its profits were stable by maintaining an efficient production system that offered barely functional chips at bargain basement prices. Though other competitors offered much higher quality in their lineups, the Ricklin Corporation practically ruled the bottom segment of the market, which was also the biggest slice of the pie.

With huge sales volume and an immense revenue, who cared if the profit margins were thin? Even the occasional stories of bad quality control and catastrophic failures in certain devices that used a Ricklin chip failed to stop the company's dominant market position in the Republic.

The founders and largest shareholders of this company was the Ricklin family. Though they lent their name to the company they founded, they lost control of the board of directors when an incompetent family head squandered away a big portion of his family's shares. It happened during the last war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom, so there was definitely a murky story behind it all. In the end, the Ricklin family diminished and pulled back.

Despite this dark incident, the Ricklin family maintained its wealth through cunning investments. They poured most of their energy into improving their financial expertise. Now they maintained their position in Bentheim's high society by relying on their profitable investment portfolio.

"Hm, that's rich people for you. It takes money to make money, and they have that in spades. Average people like me have to scrape for clients to earn a living."

Ves looked into the family tree of the Ricklins and focused on the direct descendants. The oldest son stood out immediately. The gossip rags that plied the galactic net featured plenty of articles about the young man in question.

"VINCENT RICKLIN CLAIMS HE HAS BEDDED 10 GIRLS AT A TIME: IS HE A STUD OR A MENACE?"

"VINNIE'S DRUG-FUELED BINGE LED TO A FIFTEEN-SHUTTLE PILE-UP - NO WORD YET ON CASUALTIES."

"THE RICKLIN CROWN PRINCE CHICKENED OUT OF A MECH DUEL! DISGRACEFUL!"

"SCAMMED! VINCENT RICKLIN 'MISPLACED' 300 MILLION CREDITS AFTER CON ARTISTS CONVINCED HIM TO ORDER A NON-EXISTENT YACHT"

Certainly, the only person from the Ricklin family that took Marcella aback was Vincent Ricklin. No other scion of this rich and powerful family could be so extravagant in his spending. From the wild incidents the gossip mongers have publicized, Ves got the idea that working with his latest client might not be a cakewalk.

"I sure have my work cut out for me." He sighed, and mentally prepared to interact with a man who likely held no inhibitions at all.

Chapter 59: Package

As Ves debarked from his shuttle with a curious Lucky in tow, his heart weighed down his mood. The articles he read about Vincent Ricklin all painted an ugly image of an irresponsible wastrel.

As a serious mech designer, Ves preferred his mechs be used in the purpose they had been built. He was okay with them collecting dust in a warehouse or put on display in some kind of private garage, but to play around with them and take them too lightly was pushing it. No mech designer liked to earn a reputation for making flashy mechs that lacked substance.

"Though it's not as if I have a choice."

That someone like Vincent considered buying a mech from a newbie was miraculous. Ves should thank the heavens for giving him another opportunity to fabricate and sell his variant.

Ves took a smaller shuttle to Marcella's brokerage. She owned a nice office in downtown Dorum amid many other offices of major mech manufacturers and salesmen.

BOLLINGER'S MECHS

The giant name plastered on the small five-story office made it clear that Marcella staked her claim on the entire building. Entering it, Ves was impressed by the interior. It managed to look upscale without trying too hard at it. Subtle touches such as abstract paintings and authentic leather seats gave the place a swanky casino-like look. Simply put, the decor encouraged spending.

A receptionist at the lobby directed Ves to take a private lift. It seems like all bosses took the top floor, as Ves shot straight up to the fifth story. After exiting the lift, he navigated a small hall and had security bots scan his possessions. As Ves recently learned of the importance of security, he took the precautions in stride.

He finally met Marcella in person again after entering past the double doors.

"Ves, good to see you again!" She smiled at him from behind her desk. A pile of secure data-slates sat in front of her messy desk. "Take a seat. We need to talk."

After Ves took his seat, he let out the thoughts bottling up in his mind. "I thought you'd work hard to get a customer. I did not expect you to deliver me a human form bomb."

"There are many kinds of customers in this business. As long as they have the ability to pay, you'd better get used to serving their whims."

The broker had a point, of course. Ves needed money and couldn't afford to be picky.

"So tell me about the client. I take it he's the playboy that's on the news all the time?"

She nodded at that. "Vincent is... a character. You shouldn't take everything that's on the news for granted. There's a lot going on in the Ricklin family, but they've done a good job suppressing leaks. In any case, you just need to

know that while his allowance has been curbed, he won't have any problems paying for your mech."

Naturally that should be the case. Ves wasn't about to trade his mechs for favors instead of money. "Do I need to pay attention to politics while I'm meeting with Vincent?"

"That goes without saying. Now, don't get scared. I've been in this business for over twenty years and I'm still in one hide. As long as you keep your curiosity in check there's nothing wrong with doing business in the big leagues."

Marcella enumerated a couple of things to watch out for when talking to Vincent. Above all else, Ves had to avoid talking about the family succession. He particularly should avoid any mention of Vincent's siblings. The broker also mentioned a couple of major players who had hostile relations with the Ricklin family.

Frankly, Ves found it ridiculous that he had to avoid so many topics. Still, he tried his best to remember all of the names. The last thing he wanted to do was to commit a faux pas and lose his precious commission.

"I've scheduled a meeting for you tomorrow morning. While it's not too late right now in Dorum, I don't advise you to meet with Vincent at this hour. Night clubs can have an unpredictable influence in your client's mood."

"That makes sense. I'm not in a hurry, so I can wait. Do you have a place to sleep?"

While Marcella offered him a hotel, Ves was fine with using her spare bedroom in the rear of her office floor to crash in. He played around with Lucky for an hour while thinking about the information he gathered so far. This commission reeked of trouble.

"This is probably like interacting with the Little Boss, only ten times worse."

In the perspective of some people, large rich families like the Ricklins were just thugs in a waistcoats. They usually relied on wealth and legitimate power to get their way, but weren't afraid to get their hands dirty if necessary.

The next day, Ves took the shuttle alone to a private mansion where Vincent currently lived. He evidently trashed the previous four mansions he lived in after he got kicked out from the home of his parents.

Fortunately, the structure was intact. The gates and fences looked menacing and high tech, but once security cleared his entry, he encountered a majestic Terran style mansion. White painted walls, imported tiles and brilliant glassworks dominated the decor. Everything about it spoke of sophistication. There was no way Vincent had any hand in its design.

An old gentleman who served as Vincent's personal assistant led him to an indoor sports arena where Vincent was boxing against a bot. The artificial boxing bot fought back with brutal intensity. Even if its entire body was padded, the force of its steady strikes were so punishing that if Ves faced its punch, all of his teeth would be knocked out.

"Hah!" Vincent took a glancing blow in exchange for delivering a solid smack against the bot's face. The robot's head shined yellow as it indicated the amount of damage it received.

"Again!"

As the man and the bot exchanged punches with each other, Ves already encountered his first unexpected surprise. The media often labeled Vincent as a lazy coward, but the effort he put up in his boxing was anything but cowardly.

Still, Ves chalked up Vincent's fitness to his family's rich resources. Anyone could develop his body to peak performance with genetic therapy and lots of drugs.

After Vincent finally called it quits, he threw away his boxing gear and disrobed right in front of Ves and the PA. Embarrassed, Ves turned around while a bot appeared from somewhere and blasted Vincent with cleaning gel.

After a dozen seconds passed, the cleaning bot disappeared and a clothing bot took its place. Luxurious fabrics made out of highly resilient fibers spun themselves together under the highly advanced bot's direction until Vincent's clothes materialized in full.

"Who's the nerd?" Was the first thing that came out of the client's mouth.

"Sir, this is the mech designer you have requested to build your latest mech."

"Oh right, you brought me the spare. Ptuh." Vincent spat a big glob of spit at the floor of the boxing ring. "That asshole Edwin thinks he's too hot to sell me his products, and that fucking bitch Patricia won't even pick up my calls."

"They are designers sponsored and affiliated with much more formidable forces than ours. Mr. Larkinson here is the second-place winner of the Fusion Cup. His abilities may not be on par to theirs, but he should be sufficient for your wishes. Most importantly, he is an individual entrepreneur has is not beholden to any faction."

Vincent stared at Ves as if he was a bug. "So, do you think you are good enough?"

"That is your choice. The spec sheet of my product is available on the net. I'm sure you can see it's a mech that can keep up with others at its price point."

"Gutsy thing to say for a nerd. Follow me."

The assistant and Ves followed after Vincent as he stomped away from the sports hall and entered some kind of recreation room. Pool tables, sim pods and all manner of entertainment were strewn about with no rhyme or reason.

The Ricklin scion headed towards a fully stocked bar and began to hand-mix his own drinks.

"I like to do this myself, you see. Letting the bots mix your drinks always gives you the exact same taste. Consistency is too boring. I like to seek out new thrills every day."

Ves wondered if this had anything to do with the mech he was making for his client.

"Now, I didn't ask to be born a potentate. It sure raised a lot of voices when I tested positive for the aptitude to pilot mechs. I've been puzzling about it for a while, and I recently decided to accept it and roll with it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Not really, but Ves wasn't about to admit that. Instead, he ventured out a guess. "You seek something unconventional in a mech?"

"Exactly! Heh, the mainstream mechs are so boring. As far as I'm concerned, the pilots who buy standard military mechs aren't cut out to be aces. You have to shed your fears and embrace your risks! That's also exactly why I went off the beaten path and found your mech. It's a Caesar Augustus but with crappy armor, that's so unique!"

Ves gently coughed in his hand. "Mr. Ricklin, while I'm sure my product is a satisfactory mech, shouldn't someone as eminent as you afford a better variant?"

The playboy's face immediately lost its excitement and took an awkward expression. Ves realized he asked a question he shouldn't have. Fortunately, his personal assistant came to the rescue.

"We strictly controlling our expenses. Our allocated budget for a new mech does not allow for the procurement of a top-of-the-line mech. Your product

satisfies my client's demands while remaining within his acceptable price range."

Ves could read between the lines. It appeared daddy or grandaddy Ricklin had enough of Vincent's shenanigans and cut off his astronomical allowance. Vincent was probably squirming mentally at the thought of having to penny pinch like a regular human being.

"My design is already a finalised design. It is not easy to modify parts of it without making sure it won't adversely affect its performance."

Vincent didn't appear pleased at those words, but Ves found it important to add the disclaimer.

"I don't care about minor setbacks. If I can't look cool while I'm piloting a mech, what's the point of their existence anyway? There's a lot of dorky-looking mechs out there. I'd rather die than be caught in something a bunch of virgins fantasized about in bed. At least your mech looks sufficiently cool. I like the whole Ancient Roman theme. I just have a couple of suggestions."

Ves groaned internally. It appeared the only reason why Vincent even considered buying his mech was because it looked 'cool'. He guessed most of the so-called dorky-looking mechs were specialized models designed to excel in a specific area. Sure, they might look odd, but these models enjoyed plenty of sales as many pilots recognized their merits.

"Alright Vincent, let's hear it. I'll see if it's workable to add your ideas into a modified design."

The socialite finished mixing something red and bubbly. He took a swig of his drink and yelled masculine ecstacy. "Now that's more like it! Ahem, yeah, about the mech. First up, it needs a cape."

"A... cape?"

"Fuck man, your mech already looks like a pimp, it just needs a cape to complete the ensemble. Trust me, it looks fucking great if your mech has a cape. It has to be red of course, or else it won't fit with the theme. Make it long and flowy, and don't think about using cheap fabric. If you need access to something fancy, I can refer you to a few friends I know."

Ves didn't take the suggestion seriously, but he was forced to consider the practicalities of using a cape. Any normal fabric would tear easily if the mech mistakenly stepped on it. If Ves wanted to preserve the cape when the mech who wore it only performed light duties, then Ves had to pick something synthetic and a little stronger.

"I'll need to investigate what kind of specialized fabrics I can use to form the cape, so I might take you up on your offer."

"That's great. The cape's really my top priority here. Another thing I'd like to add is decorative lighting. C'mon, all my sports cars turn into babe magnets as soon as I turn on the bling. Why no one ever thought to make a mech as flashy as possible is beyond me. Right, I need lots of lights running on the frame, and better add a couple of super-duper-powered searchlights to the head."

There were lots of reasons why mech designers refused to incorporate decorative lighting in their designs. Not only did they add vulnerabilities to the armor and electrical system of a mech, they also pointed a giant 'hit me' sign on their frames. It was apparent such arguments were lost to the client.

"I can figure something out. Give me a day to draft a bunch of sketches of possible design schemes."

"Right, right. You're okay for a nerd." Vincent said as he took yet another swig of his drink. "Okay, the cape and the lights are just to pave the way. Now sit

tight, because I'm going to reveal my secret idea to you. If you know what's good for you, then keep it for yourself. Clear?"

"Uh, clear."

Vincent grinned slyly at Ves. "Since you're a mech designer, you must have heard how smart people say that mechs are built to resemble humans, right? Well, ever since I got roped into learning how to pilot one, I can see what these old people are saying. There's just one thing that's nagging me everytime I step behind the cockpit."

"And that is?"

The mech pilot thrust out his hips and grabbed at his front end. "This. My package."

For once, Ves was speechless. He literally couldn't form any response to this insane idea.

"Now now, I don't mean to get arrested for streaking with my mech. You should design some mech pants or whatever to keep it kid friendly and all. Just make sure that when I'm out and about with my new mech, girls will be able to judge the goods, if you know what I mean?"

There was so many things wrong with this completely impractical demand. While Vincent kept espousing the benefits of boasting an 'enhanced' mech, Ves turned his gaze towards the playboy's silent personal assistant.

Ves managed to convey an expression that went along the lines of, 'Are you kidding me?'

To his credit, the old man was unflappable and never hinted at any disrespect for his young master. His eyes were sharp as a hawk and he seemed to suggest that Ves better take his master's request seriously.

What Ves would rather do was to take the strongest drinks of Vincent's bar and gulp it all down. He could already foresee his reputation going down the drain if he continued to cooperate with Vincent.

Chapter 60: Capricious

Vincent Ricklin unbelievably went on for about ten minutes on the importance of manhood in mechs. He really believed almost all mechs were gender neutral. As a bona fide man, Vincent hated the thought of mentally castrating himself whenever he piloted a mech.

Naturally, someone immersed in mechs such as Ves had no problem with the lack of gender indications. Mechs were only designed to emulate the human form in order to perform better as a war machine. Adding unnecessary extensions such as hair, skin or gender expressions did not add anything to a mech's battle performance.

Frankly, only an extremely vain pilot who cared more for his looks than his battle record could demand something like this. Ves had the misfortune of making a mech for this kind of person.

"This is an extremely complicated addition. Let me think about it for a day or two. It's not easy to add mass in the front part of the waist."

Actually, Ves wanted to ditch Vincent and go back to Marcella and demand they drop him as a client. Vinnie was only up to his third request and already the envisioned mech turned impractical.

His comm beeped with a priority message.

Ves halted Vincent's rant with a raised palm. "Ah sorry Vincent, I set my comm to notify me if there's something extremely urgent going on. Can I take this call?"

"Sure. I'll just mix another drink." Vinnie said casually as he turned his back and grabbed a couple of random bottles on the shelves.

His mail did not receive a message from Marcella, Melinda or any other acquaintance. Instead, he received a plain text message from an account named The System.

[Mission]

Mission: Gender Change Operation

Difficulty: C-Rank

Prerequisites: None

Description

A mech designer never cowers before a challenge. To be a successful designer is to be adventurous in testing new concepts. To complete this mission, you must satisfy your client's wishes and deliver a mech he can cherish as his personal war steed.

Reward: Random attribute candy worth 0.5 attribute points, 3000 Design Points

The mech designer's eyes bulged when he read through the message. The capricious System proactively gave him another mission. While that might not always be bad due to the generous rewards it always offered, but this time it meant continuing to work with the Ricklin boy.

He really needed the rewards. he'd regret it for the rest of his life if he passed them by in his haste to avoid a troublesome client. That 3000 DP looked very tasty considering Ves would need to spend months just to accumulate that much.

Ves slowly relaxed his body. He couldn't always run away from his customers no matter how unseemly they behaved. It was better to take on the challenge as best he could and treat it as another training exercise.

He took a deep breath and faced Vincent again. "Did you suggest this idea to any other mech designer?"

"Pfff." Vincent spat out disgruntledly, spilling out a few drops of alcohol in the process. "I got a hold of Patricia Schneider. When I tried to impress her of my genius plan, she straight up shut her comm! Now, she won't even answer me back after a million calls!"

No wonder she rejected Vincent to the point of ignoring him. Besides the obvious, the mere suggestion that a mech designer add some mass to a mech's front waist was an idiotic idea with no possible merit.

Yet Ves started to consider it seriously. In fact, he changed his entire mindset and suppressed his skeptical viewpoint. He had to throw away pretty much all rational thoughts in order to entertain Vincent's outlandish ideas.

"While it's difficult to, ahem, enhance a mech's endowment, it would be easier if it's made of flexible material. Are you amenable to using fluids or a sponge-like material? It will be much easier to realize, and you will have the flexibility to... vary the size while you're piloting your mech."

"Fuck yes! That's a fantastic suggestion! Just don't make it too soft or fragile. The last thing I want to happen is letting my manhood deflate like a balloon."

"Alright, let's settle for these points." Ves hastily said, trying to push this little session to a close before Vincent mentioned something even more outlandish. "After all, you don't want your customized mech to be too burdened with bling."

Vinnie blinked a little as he finished his latest drink. He burped loudly, allowing the raw alcoholic smell to waft over Ves.

"Uhm, whatever you say man. Adding all of what I've mentioned so far is pretty good enough. It'll surely pump up my personal mech up there at the top of the cool chart."

The increasingly drunk playboy started to drift off as he grew increasingly drunk. Ves tried to disengage himself from the conversation several times, only to be pulled back as Vinnie vented his frustrations about what he thought were uncool mechs.

It took well over an hour before Ves hurriedly stepped out of Vincent's mansion. He heard more than enough opinions about how mechs should really look like according to the Ricklin scion. At least he came out of the lengthy exchange with had a very good picture of Vincent's aesthetic tastes.

He wished he could get on the next passenger shuttle back to Cloudy Curtain, but he reconsidered after a moment. If he wanted to complete the System's mission as best as possible, then it was crucial that he frequently consult with his client in order to avoid taking a wrong turn.

Thus, he called up Marcella on his comm and asked her for a secure workplace where he could customize his design in peace.

"Absolute security doesn't exist, you know, but I can tell you that Dorum's MTA branch rents out the most trustworthy design studios. It'll cost you a bit, but I'll call ahead and cover the cost for you as a favor. Just don't let Vincent down. It won't do your reputation any good if you dropped the ball with your second produced mech."

"I know. Despite Vincent's many eccentricities, I'm determined to make it work. Just make sure you charge him enough to make it worthwhile."

"Oh, don't worry about that Ves. As long as he's happy, he'll bleed his credits until he's dry."

They both chuckled at each other. Ves and Marcella were of one mind when it concerned earning as much credits as possible.

Ves rerouted his shuttle to go on a straight path towards the MTA. It only took a couple of minutes to reach a sprawling complex an entire neighborhood

wide. Security was extremely stringent here. The shuttle automatically descended and landed on a security pad. Bots led by a human inspector meticulously searched the shuttle and him for any dangers. It was a bit unpleasant, but necessary.

"You're clear to go."

Ves resumed his trip as he looked around. This was his first time visiting the MTA's main branch in the Bright Republic. The tiny outpost in Cloudy Curtain paled in comparison to the might and resources of the Bentheim branch.

A great number of mech stables dotted the area. He imagined the MTA likely possessed the second most numerous mechs of any single power. Only the Republic's Mech Corps had stationed more mechs on this planet.

When he finally reached the reception hall, he hopped out the shuttle and took a constantly curious Lucky with him into the structure. The entire building was built to impress. Built in a refracting glass and crystal style, it seemingly emanated that the MTA was an open place where knowledge was shared freely.

However, some might interpret it more nefariously and suggest that no one could hide anything from their watchful eyes.

In any case, besides the System, Ves had nothing to hide. Though the System still nested deep inside his comm, he wasn't too worried about keeping it a security. No casual security sweep could ever detect it and its remarkable properties.

"Ah, good evening mister Larkinson. I see you are registered in Cloudy Curtain. How can I help?"

"I'm here on business customizing a design for a client. I'd like to rent a secure design studio. I'm sure an associate of mine has already booked one for my use. Can you check it out?"

"Hmmm. Ah, I see. Mrs. Bollinger has just registered a secure suite for you." The secretary swiped her hand, allowing a small green projection to emerge from the reception desk. "Please follow the virtual guide to reach your assigned destination. Have a good evening."

The ball slowly hovered away from the desk and out the hall. Ves followed leisurely after the green ball as it led deeper into the MTA's periphery. The core areas were all closed to outsiders, but the outer areas of the complex was already sufficiently large that it took fifteen minutes of walking before he reached his destination.

He clearly reached a section specialized in providing services to mech designers. He saw plenty of interesting structures such as a library, a financial services consultancy, a junkyard filled with spare parts and more. The structure that held the design studios on the other hand looked fairly plain in comparison.

After another security scan, Ves finally entered the enclosed hallways and entered his assigned studio. The electronically isolated room was fairly spartan in appearance. Besides a seat, a desk and a terminal, it held little else. Ves could only barely spot the high-fidelity projectors in the walls and ceilings that allowed him to look at his designs in utmost detail. These systems were leagues ahead of the cheap consumer projectors in his own workshop.

He turned on the terminal and swiped the design of the Marc Antony into its temporary storage. The professional projectors turned alive. A grand mech came into existence in the middle of the room. The resolution and fidelity of the projection astounded Ves. He even touched it experimentally, and could feel a soft resistance from his fingers. The degree of this simulation exceeded his expectations.

A small smirk appeared on his lips. "The MTA sure is extravagant in everything they do."

Witnessing this small wonder helped Ves adjust his mood. After learning an important lesson from designing the Speed Demon, Ves knew he could not keep dwelling on what he couldn't do.

Designing a mech was a labor of love. If he didn't love it as he built up its design, then it wouldn't be brought to life as a happy mech.

He considered the design process to be akin to raising a child. The so-called child in this case was just a mech, but it was still somewhat capable of inheriting the mental disposition of the designer. If he hated the design process and constantly cursed in frustration, then his mech wouldn't have a good future, just like a child who grew up to be a troublemaker.

"Alright, enough adjusting. Let's get to work."

Ves wanted to address the easiest points first, so he started with the cape. In essence, Ves could finish the job in a minute by just picking a random fabric, dye it red, and affix it onto a mech's shoulders.

Merely, the cape was too fragile to last more than a few minutes of intensive mech piloting. As multi-ton monstrosities, mechs were often subjected to high-powered stresses. If the mech ever stepped on the fabric, it would tear apart as easily as a child ripping a piece of paper into half.

"It's got to be a short cape, with supports added to its length to make sure it doesn't get entangled in the mech's frame."

By stiffening and straightening the cape's lining, he could prevent the fabric from flapping into anything dangerous. While it might make the adornment lose some of its organic liveliness, Ves thought it was a worthwhile sacrifice.

"I need to search for a suitable material."

The terminal had a direct connection to the MTA's internal market. As Ves searched for advanced fabrics, he only received a couple of dozen results. Naturally, none of them were used in making stupid capes for mechs. Instead, they served other purposes such as enhancing a cockpit's upholstery.

He straight up filtered out all the delicate materials from his search results. The list was left with more robust materials, all of which different from each other in many ways. Ves went over the products one by one, but found very little that satisfied his needs.

Though some fabrics were designed to withstand rough use, that only applied to human use. Scale the forces applied to the materials up to a mech and they'd part as easy as a spider web.

"Hm, this is a fruitless search. No matter how strong these advanced fabrics are, they were never designed to handle the stresses from mechs."

His search for a suitable material required a different approach. Instead of getting hooked on the traditional meaning of capes, he should instead consider whether Vincent even cared if his cape was made out of real fabric.

"Hm, a technically illiterate meathead like him won't even be able to tell the difference."

With that in mind, he searched for a different kind of material. It had to somewhat resemble the thinness and malleability of a sheet of fabric, but it should be much more resilient.

The list that the terminal spat out was a lot more extensive. From thin sheets of flexible armor to reinforced padding for delicate cabling, Ves found the selection to be a lot more extensive. He carefully refined his results and combed out the unacceptable choices.

Thicker materials such as flexible armor did not flap at all when a wind blew through them. On the other hand, the thinnest materials could withstand some

damage but not too much. It took Ves a bit of time to whittle down the extremes and end up with a small selection of products that possessed the right characteristics.

"Hm, instead of making the choice on my own, I can send it to Vincent and have him take care of the procurement."

After all, the products left on his screen all shared many similarities. Their toughness was derived out of a clever weaving of specialized synthetics and thinly threaded metals. A tough matrix support kept the fabric from getting torn too easily, though they did cut back on the material's fluidity. Nevertheless they met almost all other requirements, so Ves hoped Vincent would find them acceptable.

He composed a short message to Vincent and added the links to the materials for him to see. After sending off that mail, Ves turned to his next task. His face already took on an exasperated expression.

Somehow, he had to turn his mech into a lightshow.