

Chapter 61: Design Studio

Ves was not immersed in the whole shuttle racing scene. As someone focused on mechs his entire life, the sleek personal transport shuttles that were capable of both atmospheric and space flight held little appeal to him. That did not mean others found them unworthy of their time.

In fact, lots of norms worshipped shuttles. They paid fanatical attention to each newly released shuttles and liked to customize and tinker their own vehicles in their free time. Adding some decorative lighting was just one of the ways a fanatic distinguished himself among his peers.

He looked over some footage on the galactic net and found it to be a basic concept. It could be as simple as adding a few colored stripes to adding in an elaborate artistic pattern. It impressed Ves that these hobbyists cobbled up evocative looks for their shuttles.

"I won't be able to get Vincent's approval if I half-ass this job."

The best-looking vehicles didn't necessarily have the most lights. Instead, the artists who customized them used patterns and other artistic tricks to maximize the impact of each streak of light. If Ves wanted to keep up, he had to be a little inventive.

"Hm, what would fit my Marc Antony?"

He left the galactic net and opened the mech design program. As a software developed by the MTA itself, it possessed elaborate features. Still, they were not on par with the Mech Designer System's own suite except for the projectors. The MTA's design studio incorporated high quality projection systems that could bring any image to life.

When the imposing image of the Marc Antony appeared in the middle of the room, Ves circled the projection and slowly considered his ideas.

The mech looked like an armored soldier. With its vapor-generated helmet crest and heavy rectangular shield, it looked purpose-built for war. Ves also chuckled to himself that it looked quite dashing. What he had to do now was to figure out a way to enhance the mech's cool factor without being too overboard. Luckily, most lighting systems are cheap and don't require a license. After all, they were mainly made to customize shuttles.

"Getting my hands on a suitable lighting system isn't hard. What's a little harder is that their toughness sucks."

He faced the same problem as with the cape. These kinds of accoutrements just weren't designed to accommodate a fighting machine. While there were a few systems designed for traffic control or rescue mechs that possessed a little more reinforcement, they fell short when put into active combat situations.

"Maybe I've been influenced too much by the way these lighting systems are applied to shuttles. I don't have to follow the exact same scheme for my mech."

He considered designing a standard scheme as well as add something extra. As a mech accumulated damage, it generally looked worse. In order to placate Vincent in the event he ended up in a real battle, Ves decided to use that property to add internal lighting that wouldn't be visible unless the armor got torn open.

As Ves knew his design best, he already had an idea how to structure the internal lighting. He had no trouble marking out many small areas where a small but powerful light source could be placed.

As the lights didn't really suck up that much energy compared to other systems, Ves didn't even bother with adding power cables to keep them running. Instead, he added wireless power transmitters nestled deeper in the

mech to provide power without relying on delicate and easily damaged cabling.

To be certain it matched Vincent's standard of coolness, Ves tested out his change. When Ves used the design program's simulation module to simulate accumulating damage, he found the mech to be glowing increasingly red from the cracks in its armor. Against the backdrop of the mech's predominantly black coating, the ominous red glow enhanced the menacing aura.

Inspired by this savage look, Ves took up a sketching program and drafted a couple of lines on the mech's wireframe model. He predominately added jagged lines, akin to the stylized lightning bolts on the shield which he also sketched over with some light streaks. He colored it mostly red except for the lights on the shield, which were shaded a bright yellow.

When Ves stepped back and let the design program simulate the lighting scheme, he was impressed by his own work. The light scheme enhanced the ancient warrior theme of his mech. The sharpness of the jagged, diagonal lines gave the mech the impression that it was a war god descended from the heavens.

"Hm, though it looks good, I'm not sure if Vincent will like it. He has a very discerning taste."

To be safe, Ves spent an entire day wracking his brain for alternate design patterns. He slept, ate and showered at the room's basic living facilities but spent the rest of his time crunching his brain. Lucky got so bored that Ves activated the guide program to release a projected ball that flew around erratically for his cat to chase around.

His hard work allowed him to come up with a few viable looking designs. He made a white lightning bolt pattern to evoke a lightning god feel and a green

curving pattern to contrast nicely with the red accents. He finished his design session by forming a yellow pattern that evoked speed.

As he projected the different lighting schemes side by side, he had to admit that while they did the job, they fell short of greatness. Ves simply lacked the practice and proficiency to go beyond the basic one-color lighting schemes. Mixing two or three colors together in a harmonious whole was a lot more difficult than he thought.

"If Vincent is really dissatisfied by my attempts, he should just hire his own artist." He concluded. As someone who looked familiar with the shuttle racing scene, Vincent must have his own contacts.

He sent the sketches to Vincent and called it a day. He'd been staying in the design studio for more than a day now. Thinking of all the trouble he went through so far, he hoped Vincent was good for the money when Ves finally delivered his product.

After stepping out of the design studio, he called up an automatic guide that led him to the MTA's visitor cafeteria. Just because he ate some instant rations didn't mean he appreciated them. He looked forward to grabbing a more proper bite.

As thousands of pilots, designers and technicians visited the MTA each day in Dorum, its dining facilities were top notch. Those with more discerning tastes could enter the nearby restaurant while those who were fine with cheaper food prepared by the best bots visited the cafeteria. As Ves picked a couple of his favorite meats, he took a random seat and started to dig in.

Just as he finished chewing, a firm hand clapped his back.

"Ves! What a surprise to see you here!"

Ves turned around and saw a young woman he hadn't seen since his last visit to Bentheim. "Charlotte?"

Charlotte Hoffmeister grinned as she bumped the seat next to him and hopped on it. She dropped her plate of food with a small clatter, causing bits and pieces of food to spill to the side.

"We haven't been in touch for a while. So what are you up to?"

He shrugged. "I'm in the process of customizing my first commercial variant mech for a client. I recently completed a sale a few weeks ago and now I'm here to meet the needs of my second client."

Charlotte raised her eyebrow in appreciation as she gnawed at her chicken drumstick. "Looks like your business is already up and running. That's nice. There's way too many dumbasses who think they're all that but flounder when they finally start on their own."

"I was luckier than most." Ves said reservedly, not wanting to disparage his fellow designers. After all, before the System came he was one of them. "I'm not doing great, but I'm sure I can overcome my troubles if I work hard enough."

"That's the spirit!" Charlotte pounded the table with her palm. "Look at me. Despite coming up second to a side tournament, I'm one of only three new recruits for the MTA's Enforcement Division from this year's graduating class!"

"Oh, congratulations. No wonder you look so great in your new piloting suit."

Ves was genuinely impressed at Charlotte's accomplishment. The MTA's Enforcement Division might have a reviled reputation among outsiders, but mech designers in particular appreciated them for keeping the peace and deter shady manufacturers from stealing their designs. Their prestige was a step up from the Republic's own Mech Corps as their recruitment standards were incredibly stringent.

"I'm still a trainee for now, but you can bet I'm going to places you can't even imagine. Too bad I had to give the Kirby back to the academy. I miss that big old lug, even if it took a nasty beating in the tournament."

The two shared a few words on more inconsequential subjects before Charlotte had to go back to her training. "I'll see you around, Ves. Keep up the good work. I'll be sure to spread the word."

"Thanks a lot. I appreciate any help I can get."

Having met Charlotte reminded him he hadn't gotten in touch with any of his friends in a while. Of course, everyone drifted off to pursue their own career, but he should at least get in touch with Carlos now that he had the time. Ves dug up his name from his comm and called him up to see if he was available.

"Evening, Ves. Man, I thought you dropped off the edge of the universe. Look who's back!"

"Haha, I've been occupied with my own work, but I happened to be here on Bentheim for business. Do you want to meet up?"

"Sure! I know just the place to take you if you're visiting Bentheim for the first time. It's a must-visit attraction of our planet!"

Carlos sent a standardized set of coordinates to him that he could feed into a aircar service.

"I'll be waiting for you at that place!"

Shrugging, Ves finished his food and left the cafeteria. He boarded a small hovering platform to reach the exit of the complex faster. As he looked back at the imposing base, he sighed at the power of the MTA. They possessed military might far beyond even the best mercenary corps in the Republic.

After he hailed an aircar, he fed the piloting system the coordinates and let the car take him to where Carlos waited. He looked outside the window and

admired the sprawling urban forest outside. Not even the dignified Rittersberg could ever compare to the liveliness of Bentheim.

The shuttle finally descended on the outskirts of Dorum. It turned out the coordinates Carlos fed was a large open-air mech colliseum, with several smaller arenas placed around the main attraction. It somewhat resembled the stadium and convention center where the YTE was held, but this one was obviously privately owned.

The mood here was much more dynamic. The abundant visitors all wore branded clothing that featured their favorite mechs or celebrities. Even from this distance Ves could feel the savage thrum and collisions of real mechs battling it out in front of an audience. The cost of operating this enterprise must run up to the billions, but from the amount of fans that visited the matches, it evidently ran very smoothly.

His friend waited just inside the gate. After paying the admission fee, Ves met up with Carlos and hugged him loosely. "Good to see you again. How's it going at work?"

"So-so. I'm still learning the ropes. It takes time for me to move up in such a large organisation. But look at you. You're a successful mech designer now, having at least one sale under your belt. Most of the other people from our class are really jealous at you, you know."

Ves wasn't bothered by the thoughts of others. "If they think they can do better, then let them start their own businesses."

Naturally, that was nearly impossible. Both of them smiled at each other as they knew that. Carlos shook his head.

"Well, enough about that. Let's head inside. I've been saving up these promotional tickets for the amateur ring for a year. Might as well use them up now."

They talked about what they had been doing since the last time they met. Ves talked about some of the challenges he faced. When he talked about the excitement of building a mech with your own hands, Carlos looked envious.

"Man, you're much further ahead in your career than me. I'm still stuck in the same old drudgery of checking mechs for faults."

"It's been a few months. Hang in there. With your skillset, you should expect a promotion soon enough."

Ves and Carlos had reached the entrance of the smallest and shabbiest looking arena. As cleaning bots were cheap nowadays, Ves figured the organizers intentionally kept its walls weathered. The scanners at the gates allowed them entry once Carlos showed his tickets. They climbed the stairs and entered the interior of a wide arena that could host up to a hundred thousand people if a major event was going on.

As it was just a normal day, the arena was only filled up to a third of its capacity. Frankly speaking, the promotional tickets Carlos won from who-knows-where we're not all that valuable. Ves could easily afford entry now that he potentially earned millions with each mech sale. Still, he wasn't used to being wealthy, so he still appreciated Carlos' gesture.

They found a pair of seats that brought them close to the middle of the arena. Several fans were chugging their beers or eating their junk food as they yelled at the duelists in the arena. Apparently, two light mechs were on stage. As they were rather fragile, they both played very conservatively. It led to quite a few boos from the disgruntled audience.

"Man, I always hate it when these light mechs are dancing around all the time. It's like they're competing on who will run out of energy first."

"Light mechs might be cheap, but it still costs quite a bit to repair any damage." Ves noted. "Personally, if I were to bring a mech onto a stage, I'd go for a mediumweight."

It was easy to say this, but not every pilot had the means to buy a good medium mech. Most of the lower rungs were unable to cough up enough money for a decently armored mech.

As Ves keenly knew, the most expensive component of any mech was its armor plating. In today's manufacturing environment, as long as the materials weren't too exotic, any delicate or intricate machinery could be replicated with 3D printers and other advanced manufacturing machines. However, no matter how advanced mankind's production capabilities had grown, they could not make gold out of lead.

Good materials led to great end products, and nowhere was this more evident than the current state of mech armor. Tricks such as modular armor, quantum-scaffolding and other buzzwords hadn't measured up to their promises. In the end, armor developers resorted to the simplest solutions of finding the best base materials to work with. The Milky Way galaxy was immense, and many unconventional stars proved breeding grounds of highly desirable exotic materials.

Natural, due to the special circumstances in which they were formed, they were also notoriously scarce. That meant that the mining companies that exploited these valuable mining areas made a killing. Ves heard a rumor in which a top-of-the-line mech from a first-rate superstate could cost up a trillion bright credits. That was an unimaginable sum of money in the perspective of the Bright Republic, but it would only cause a citizen of a superstate to blink their eyes.

In any case, Ves and Carlos talked a bit about their own preferences while casually paying attention to the slow-going dance-off on stage.

However, Ves felt a nervous tension from his friend. Evidently, Carlos had another purpose in mind when he asked to meet up with Ves. He wasn't even interested in the matches at all. No matter how exciting the amateurs fought on stage, Carlos never batted an eye.

Ves wondered what was going on. Carlos couldn't be in trouble, right?

Chapter 62: Leviticus

"So anyway, I didn't only invite you here to talk about old times. To be honest, I wanted to ask you something."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "What's that?"

Carlos stopped paying attention to the match entirely and turned to face Ves with the most serious face he had ever seen on his friend.

"You know what kind of job I have now. Even if you say I'm likely to move out of my current position, it will take many years, perhaps even decades before I go anywhere near the development process of a new design. And that's only if I resign and switch companies, as the current one I work for is just a wholesaler which buys completed mechs from other manufacturers."

"You can't rush a career, Carlos. I've seen you studying for nights on end back in college. You've got a good head on your shoulder. Any employer will be bound to appreciate your talents."

"But I can't wait that long." Carlos shook his head. "A successful mech designer always starts his career when he's young, we both know that. So what if I wait until I'm in my 80s or 90s until a company sees fit to include me in their research and development department? I'll be playing second fiddle to a 30 or 40-year old who is either a genius or who had the right connections for the job. I don't want to be an expendable cog in the machine."

Ves had an idea what Carlos was going for with his little rant. He wasn't sure if he liked it. "That's the way the world works. The ones with the silver spoon in

their mouths already have their foot in the door. Us regular people need to either take risks or just keep working out butts off to close the disparity between us and them. There's no shortcuts."

Carlos' eyes burned. "I admire you Ves. I already said that, but it bears repeating. You've taken that gamble. You looked at that impossibly tall mountain and successfully climbed the top. From getting the equipment together to receiving a couple of production licenses as grants, you got through every obstacle in the way of starting your wholly owned mech business. I'm not like you. I can't take climb in your footsteps. But..."

"You want to work for me. Accept a lower position under my employ and grow along with me."

The pair stayed silent for a time. Carlos nodded then, looking a little bit pained as he had to accept a status that was lower than Ves. "I can't climb the mountain myself, but if you drop down some rope, I can pull myself up."

"I've been doing fine on my own so far. What makes you think I need an extra hand?" Ves asked with a bit of reservation in his tone.

"Having worked with many mech manufacturers delivering crappy mechs, I know a bit how they work. Someone like you can't shoulder all of the jobs of running an independent mech design and fabrication studio alone. You need someone to do the grunt work of fabricating mechs at the very least."

Ves released a sigh. He had indeed been thinking of hiring a fabricator "I appreciate your honesty in telling me your ambition. But it's going to be awkward if I'm going to be your boss. I'm looking for someone in the near future to fill up the fabricator position in my workshop, but since it concerns certain trade secrets, I'm hesitant in letting anyone else work under my direction."

"Then that's an even better reason to consider taking me under your wing. You know me and I know you. We've been pals for years. I'm a hundred percent sure you don't trust anyone more than me when it comes to getting your hands dirty with mechs."

He had a point. Ves did not have too many friends in the mech circles. Hiring a stranger was a complete gamble as far as he was concerned. He could spend an excessive time screening potential employees and still get burned by them. Sure, with the current laws in place, he possessed a lot of means to make abusers pay for it, but enforcing a punishment after the deed was done did not help him out in the long run if certain secrets were exposed.

Right now, Ves relied on two advantages to grow his nascent business. His implementation of the X-Factor was a delicate secret that if exposed might change the mech industry substantially if other designers could be convinced of its existence. However, that progress would come at a cost to his own competitiveness. He wasn't so good-natured enough to expose the secrets of the X-Factor to the public.

Besides, there might be a small but highly placed circle out there who knew about the X-Factor but kept it among themselves. If Ves somehow leaked the details of their golden goose, they may decide to make an example out of him. Ves wanted to avoid attracting such high profile attention.

As for the other advantage, the System could absolutely not be exposed. He had run through all the possible scenarios hundreds of times, and none of them gave him a good end.

"I need to think about it. I'm still working on my second ever sale. It's still too early for me to consider a hire. I'll reconsider your proposal once my mech business picks up in sales."

That gave Ves an excuse to hold off Carlos. He didn't want to reject him directly, but neither did he want to bring Carlos back to Cloudy Curtain immediately.

Having no other choice, Carlos slumped and nodded his head. "Okay. I'll be waiting for your answer. It's not like my current career is going anywhere in the meantime."

After moving past this conversation, Ves tried to lift their spirits and started to comment on the happenings in the amateur ring. As the matches went by, he noticed a pattern in the pilots that chose to exhibit their combat skills in the lowest ring.

Half of the mech pilots who performed in the amateur ring were often young rich hotshots with too much money and not enough sense. As such, the younger pilots often took daring risks, as the newborn calves are not afraid of tigers.

Ves found their mechs to be interesting. They ran almost the entire spectrum of close-to-medium ranged mechs. As this arena was fairly small, snipers and artillery mechs had no place in this setting. Still, with their souped up mechs adorned with various holographic stickers of tigers or pinup girls, these mech pilots behaved as if they were stars.

However, old ginger is spicier. The other half of the pilots on stage often consisted of veterans too impaired to serve in the field. Often suffering from various wounds, these grizzled pilots were not resigned to spend the rest of their days in retirement.

While their mechs were often cheaper compared to the rich kids, their extensive proficiency and battle experience made up for their gear. As they had more to lose, they often fought very conservatively, to the point of giving up the match before they were about to suffer catastrophic damage.

The contrast between the two types of pilots often led to the most exciting matches. The ultra-aggression of the younger generation often pressured the more cautious older generation into defending against an onslaught. Both the attacker and defender relied on different skills to capitalize on any mistake their opponents made.

"That's Leviticus coming up on stage!" Carlos yelled as he rose up from his seat. "He's my favorite pilot in the amateur ring."

Ves beheld the pilot and mech that caught the eye of his friend. Even without his expertise in mechs, he could tell the old machine was on its last legs. The armor was such a crazy patchwork of plates that it was hard to tell if there were any original plates left. The stride of the mech also looked uneven, as if the left leg held a fraction less power than the right one. As for its weapons, it obviously used to hold shoulder mounts, but only crude holes remained where they sat. It wielded a crudely shaped staff that might have been a reshaped construction beam as its only weapon.

"That's a really terrible mech. Why are you rooting for this guy?"

"Man, you don't know about Leviticus?" Carlos looked at Ves as if he was an alien. "Man, you've been living off the grid for too long. Is that backwater planet so remote you can't even keep up with the arena anymore?"

"Hey, I've been busy with work. I quit following the scene a half year ago."

Carlos shrugged and explained his fascination for Leviticus. "Anyway, this guy's special. Unlike all the other active pilots, he's a borderline potentate. He's really unlucky in that regard."

That surprised Ves, causing him to look at Leviticus and his mech a second time. Now that he looked closer, the movements weren't as fluid as a regular mech. The minute stutters and jerky shifts were the typical symptoms of either a malfunctioning neural interface or a pilot that possessed bad aptitude.

"They say that lacking the aptitude to pilot a mech isn't the worst thing in the world." Carlos continued, completely forgetting for the moment that Ves used to aspire to be a pilot as well. "There's a fate worse than being a norm, and that is being a potentate that barely passes the threshold."

"I see. Leviticus shouldn't be able to pilot a mech this good if he's a borderline case."

"That's because he's putting in twice as much work into piloting than any other potentate. You can't imagine the long hours he spent trying to speed up his response. If a regular pilot operates at a hundred percent, he's overclocking himself to perform a hundred-and-fifty percent of his potential."

That genuinely sounded impressive. He looked as the scrappy medium mech bowed at its opponent, a gleaming blue light mech that just happened to be the nemesis of Leviticus. The worst thing a pilot with a slowed response speed could encounter was a light mech that specialized in speed.

Yet still, more than half of the crowd still rooted for Leviticus, Carlos included. Ves was confused at everyone's enthusiasm. It was as if the possibility of Leviticus losing did not occur in their minds at all.

"What's up with the crowd?"

"Oh, you'll see. Don't think my man Levi can be beat so easily. He'll pull off a miracle, as he did many times."

The match started. Predictably, the blue light mech started to circle around the medium mech at close to the maximum possible speed. Leviticus stayed still, not even attempting to turn to keep up with the light mech's orientation.

Eventually, the opponent reached the rear of the medium mech and darted forward with its twin daggers ready. Yet before either blades struck, Leviticus caused his mech to fall over backwards. He did it in such a way that allowed

him to place one end of the staff in a direct collision course to his approaching enemy.

The light mech tried to veer away, but Leviticus timed his improvised action just close enough for him to guarantee a hit. The light mech to its credit used the utmost of its maneuverability to shift its impact zone from the middle of its chest to its right shoulder.

A lot of people in the audience groaned as the staff managed to dig out a clump of armor but nothing else. Ves knew they didn't just groan for no reason. One of the more macabre attractions of the arenas was that fatalities were not uncommon.

If it happened once or twice, then so be it. But they happened so regularly that people recognized there was more going on. In fact, the safety measures built into each competing mech were of such an inferior standard that many suspected the owners of the arena deliberately cheaped out on them. It was a far cry to the extensive and reliable safety measures used to keep the YTE free from spilling any blood.

Nevertheless, the light mech hopped backwards and well out of reach of Leviticus. It took in the damage it suffered and started to calculate its options.

However, Leviticus did not give his opponent an opportunity to come up with another answer. With obvious effort, his mech started to jog towards the opponent. The light mech instinctively leaped backwards and continued to widen the distance in order to avoid getting caught.

The chase continued for several minutes, but Ves found it strange that Leviticus even attempted to chase. A medium mech could never catch up to a light mech, after all. His opponent realized that too, and started to calm down. Its retreating pattern became more exquisite and it always made sure never to get stuck in a corner.

"What's this guy up to?"

"Haha, no idea, but he always pulls something crazy that will tip the scales in his favor."

Looking closer, Ves recognized that Leviticus conserved his energy. He always made the best turns and moved to cut off the light mech with the least amount of steps. Meanwhile, the constant hopping around boosted the energy consumption of the light mech to an unsustainable rate.

"The energy reserves are only topped off up till twenty percent in the amateur ring, right?"

"Yeah, that hasn't changed. The last thing anyone wants to see is a battle of attrition."

In a real battle the mechs should be able to sustain their rate of consumption for a while. However, with just a limited charge going in the ring, a race to see who exhausted itself first always ended fairly quickly.

Indeed, the light mech's pilot seemed to realize his predicament, and stopped his endless running. He was facing the dilemma any light mech pilot faced when facing a superior opponent. He could keep running, but waste more energy than his opponent, or he could fight but risk coming off worse as his tonnage was smaller than the enemy's.

Eventually, he decided to compromise and made small, flanking attacks. Leviticus never seemed to keep up with the light mech's turns and dives, but with his lengthy if ugly staff, he always positioned it in just a way to force the light mech to abort his attack lest he impale himself onto the butt end of the staff.

"Damn, it's the weapons that decided this match even before it started." Ves commented, appreciative of Leviticus and his skillful use of his staff. "That light mech is not fast enough to go around the staff."

The light mech eventually decided to risk it all, and dove in deeper. The staff loomed before the lighter mech but its pilot clearly went in with a sacrifice in mind. It introduced a sideways motion in its approach, attempting to let the staff fall onto its left side. However, Leviticus somehow exploded in speed for just a fraction of a second. The staff managed to correct its path just in time for the light mech to get its power reactor squarely in the way of the weapon.

An enormous crunch sounded out as the light mech stopped in its track. The knives dropped as the staff end burst from its upper waist. The entire crowd went wild as they cheered for Leviticus. Some of them even screamed for blood.

Unfortunately for the thrill seekers, this particular light mech model hosted its cockpit in the lower waist. Only its power core got run through by the staff. If it was a cockpit, then it would have been a certain fatality. The arena's weak safety measures could never have stopped it in time.

Ves was pretty sure Leviticus had blood on his hands. Any seasoned gladiator couldn't avoid such occurrences, as it was simply too dangerous for them to hold back.

Leviticus slowed down his reaction speed now that the battle was over. With excruciating slowness, he pulled his mech's staff from the corpse of the other mech and let it fall to the ground. No one seemed to care such an action could have aggravated any injuries the opposite pilot suffered.

"So what do you think about my man Levi?"

"He's impressive. He manages to make the most out of his mech with minimal movements. He's the perfect heavy mech pilot."

Carlos nodded in agreement. "He's mentioned in his interviews that he's saving up his prize money for a good one. It will take a while, though. The

amateur ring doesn't give out much rewards. It takes a lot of money to keep his current mech afloat."

A comm rung out. Ves lifted his wrist and saw that Vincent Ricklin was on the line. It was time for him to go back to work.

"I gotta go. My client is calling."

"Uhm sure. It was fun. I'll be staying here for a few more hours. Go ahead without me."

"Alright, see you later."

Ves picked up the call, hoping Vincent came with good news.

Chapter 63: Nether Regions

"My man Ves, I received your files. I can't say I'm entirely satisfied with your work. The cape doesn't have any frills and the surface lighting schemes don't seem impressive at all. The only thing I found cool is the red lights installed underneath the armor."

Ves was afraid of that. Not satisfying his client meant his rewards for the mission could be reduced. "I have made my design choices with resilience in mind. Excessive frills will be the first thing that gets lost when your mech receives damage. It's better to keep a clean appearance that looks great both when it's pristine and when it has survived a battle."

The excuse was enough to cause Vincent to pause in his tirade. He frowned and thought over his words. "Alright, but I'm consulting a pro shuttle customizer artist for the lighting scheme. I still feel your designs are too basic. Heh, why didn't I do that in the first place. Your not an artist."

"If you are unsatisfied with my designs, feel free to turn to someone else." Though the System wouldn't like it, Ves agreed with Vincent's choice. "Just make sure the artist knows that mechs are machines that are meant to be put in the frontlines."

"Yeah yeah, whatever you say. As for getting permission and sourcing the materials, I'll let my assistant handle the details."

"That would be appreciated." Though he could purchase the extra materials himself, he'd be liable to get ripped off in the process. "In any case, I'm still in the conceptual stage of working out a design to meet your... third demand."

"I'm expecting to see your proposal by tomorrow. I need you to work on my new mech as fast as possible, within two weeks at least."

That knocked Ves off course. This was the first time he heard about any deadline. "Is it very urgent that I deliver your mech in that time?"

"Yes, it's super urgent! I've already got a bet going on. I'm going to show that bastard that I'm not scared or anything! I'm NOT a coward!"

"Yes, yes, you're very brave!" Ves said quickly, trying to avoid getting on the receiving end of a tirade. "Vincent, I'll get it done today and have a potential design for you to peruse by tomorrow."

"You'd better!"

The signal cut off abruptly, causing Ves to sigh with relief. He had been a little negligent in his duties. He thought he had plenty of time to consider all of his options and refine Vincent's dream mech step by step. The sudden hard deadline of two weeks put a sudden stop to his leisurely vacation on Bentheim.

He took Lucky with him and left the arena and its cheering fans behind. He hailed an aircar straight back to the MTA. After going through several security scans, he finally ended up at a design studio similar to the last one. He was ready to get back to work.

"Hm, a bulge, huh?" Ves considered as he summoned the image of his mech, now with a cape and some rudimentary light system. In his eyes, the mech

already looked pretty masculine, in a knight in shiny armor kind of way. Adding an obvious bulge to the front waist would ruined the entire feel of the mech.

"Men who wore armor in those days never exposed their private parts to any danger. It's one of the most vulnerable weak points in a human body."

Mechs were pretty much the same way. Its central position just on top of the mechanically hungry legs made it a prime position to place the engines. As such, the waist and lower torso portion of a mech possessed plenty of armor already. It would be highly challenging to elongate the front section without impacting a mech's maneuverability in some strange fashion.

Unless he stuck something on it at a right angle. But then he'd ruin his reputation and get Vincent get arrested for indecency.

"I shouldn't be the only person who is dealing with this problem."

The mech is an imitation of the human form. Yet mech designers were content to wholly minimize any waist protrusions as much as possible in the name of efficiency. Perhaps Vincent had a point where he said that the lack of gender expression in a mech presented an obstacle to fully bonding with it in the process. If Ves simply put something subtle there, it might even improve the mech's X-Factor.

"But what if the pilot is of another gender?"

Ves could imagine a dissonance between the mech and the pilot should occur, but not too strong. Plenty of female and other gendered pilots pulled off fantastic performances in very masculine mechs. And while they are less common, his own feminine-looking Fantasia variant also showed that no male pilots ever performed much worse than the female pilots.

Still, he couldn't help but feel that gender did matter. Maybe this was the great wall that held him back from scoring higher than an E in terms of X-Factor.

The instance that he earned a C-rating from the System must have been attributed to other factors. It might even be higher if Ves paid attention to his mech's gender in the first place.

"Is this the secret to obtaining a higher X-Factor?" Ves asked himself, and with the knowledge he mastered so far, he guessed that it might very well be a viable direction to pursue.

He then recalled some strange skills and subskills in the System's Skill Tree. They mostly pertained to replacing a mechanical mech's parts with biological equivalents. So instead of using artificial muscles made out of alloys and polymers, these researchers cultured living muscle tissue with the same shape and function.

A mech is an imitation of the human body.

"There are some people out in the galaxy who believe in the phrase a bit more literal than others."

Ves imagined he touched upon one of the great secrets of what humanity's elite are pursuing. He realized the Mech Designer System's unintentional reveal of what other researchers are pursuing in their dark and hidden laboratories were dangerous secrets. This was so far above his level that if he ever revealed any of his suspicions, that he might draw an entire battlefleet from some first-rate superstate upon his head.

"I better keep all of these thoughts locked up for the moment." He quickly concluded, and turned his attention back to the matter of portraying a certain piece of male anatomy.

He referenced the galactic net again and took a look at how ancient pre-space flight civilizations dealt with the matter of armoring the crotch.

A lot of ridicule-inducing images appeared. Some ancient armorers literally shaped a form-fitting codpiece that looked like they could snugly fit the

member. In today's age, if Ves implemented such a thing onto his mech, he'd literally get hounded from his profession.

The slightly larger and subtler codpieces were not much better. They still bulged out so obviously that they never failed to call an observer's gaze to the person's waist. Sure, they offered a lot of protection, but the way they drew the eye just caused them to look like flaunting peacocks.

"Then again, it's not like Vincent is any different."

Still, Ves sought a more decent example. He found a couple of interesting images. Some armor designers neatly avoided this issue by adding a chainmail or plated skirt. While that would work brilliantly with certain mechs, he was sure to draw Vincent's ire. A man never wore skirts, after all, and his client wanted to flaunt his masculinity, not negate it entirely.

He eventually spotted some codpieces that looked a bit more fitting for modern times. These codpieces skewed rounded shapes and instead used sharp angles in a combination of triangular and rectangular forms. These examples evoked the suggestion that they were there to do their job of protecting the crotch without attracting undue attention.

It looked sharp, modern and most importantly did not cross the line into indecency. Ves liked the concept very much that he immediately turned on the design studio's designer program and put his inspirations into form.

He hit some snags along the way. The Marc Antony was a frame based on the heavily-armored Caesar Augustus. Both mechs weighed at the top end of the medium weight class. As the legs and the waist were some of the most heavily-armored portions of any mechs, this meant that it was highly unusual to add additional layers on top.

Ves had to consider the range of motion of the legs. Extreme contortions could very well bump into the mech and crush any rigid obstacle in its way. He

doubted Vincent wanted everyone to see him destroy his facsimile manhood while inside the cockpit. Shaping the codpiece in a triangular shape so that its bottom portion was minimized could only go so far.

"If I can't avoid any collisions, then it needs to have some give."

He thought back to yesterday and recalled his conversation with Vincent. He casually mentioned using a sponge-like material to build this part with. Such a method could allow Ves to avoid the problem of leaving his mech open to destroying its own gender.

He took an hour to design this simple part. He first took a resilient sponge-like composite from the market and shaped it in a roughly triangular form that protruded sufficiently from the lower waist. He undersized it in order to leave enough room for armored plates to cover up the soft and flexible composite. He didn't want to resort to a different material so he chose to stick to the same HRF armor plating.

After stepping back, he took in the entire projection of the mech. The Marc Antony still looked awe-inspiring and ready to fight. The triangular armored codpiece nonetheless attracted a substantial amount of attention, but its design was sufficiently different from the more obscene examples in history. It looked... tasteful, even if Ves would never admit it. Still, he hoped Vincent accepted this addition.

His Marc Antony variant somehow looked more complete with the codpiece. Well, Ves personally preferred it to be smaller and less attention grabbing. Nevertheless, now that he considered the question whether it made any difference if mechs had genders, it looked more fitting.

When Ves contacted Vincent in the morning, he showed the groggy-looking scion the projection of his work.

Even Vincent adopted a stumped expression. His jaw practically dropped as he admired the augmented form. "It's great! That's exactly what I was going for! It's a bit classier than I prefer, but absolutely nobody will ridicule me for hiding my package any longer!"

Ves questioned who exactly lacked the sense to criticize a mech's exclusion of unnecessary additions. Still, he kept his mouth shut, not willing to disparage any powerful heirs and step on Vincent's toes at the same time.

After ranting about the genius of the codpiece for several minutes, Vincent finally gave Ves the green light. "I want you to go back to whatever dirtball you're based in and produce my mech according to this design! Make sure you coordinate with my assistant if you need anything extra. Don't call me back until you finished the mech."

His personal assistant took over the line. Ves asked a bit about the progress of procuring the materials for the cape, the lighting system and also the codpiece, and got a reassuring answer.

"Our logistical department has fast tracked deliveries to your workshop in Cloudy Curtain. They will arrive long before your flight back to your home planet."

Ves then referred the personal assistant contact his broker to sign a contract for a commission. Marcella was much more capable of handling the sales portion of the negotiation. Once he received his advance payment, he could ship all the other materials he needed to his workshop.

As Ves packed up his meager luggage and brought his cat back to the spaceport, he wondered how he should actually build his mech. Vincent's product had to be in his hands in around thirteen days, which sounded a lot, but certification and shipping took a lot of time and so did acclimatization. He couldn't expect Vincent to master his new mech in a day.

The first time he fabricated the Marc Antony, he took over a week, and that was when he worked with maximum care. Now that he grew a little more familiar with the fabrication process, he could skip most of the excessive caution and work a little more briskly.

"Ideally, the fabrication shouldn't take longer than a week including the additional parts. Any longer and it calls into question why I even bother fabricating the mech personally in the first place."

He could definitely imagine hiring a full-time fabricator to take care of his production, but now was not the time. He mentally apologized to Carlos for putting his job offer aside. Once he received more demand for his product, he could revisit this issue.

Chapter 64: Second Mech

By the time Ves exited the transit shuttle, he breathed in the fresh and moist air of his home planet. Bentheim might have been a melting pot of trade and business, but it did not fare well hosting so many people in such a small planet. He led Lucky and his floating luggage carrier onto a nearby aircar and headed back to his home.

His workshop already received its first deliveries of materials by the time he returned. The rest of the raw materials he needed to build a modified Marc Antony trickled in throughout the day. The new security system installed by SASS did their work and performed thorough scans of the arriving delivery shuttles and the containers they carried.

Ves already summoned up the design in his System's Designer program and optimized his first commercial design. He had advanced his skills a little bit since he first completed this design, so Ves took advantage of it to marginally increase his mech's speed and armor specifications.

"It's only been a few weeks but I've already advanced this much with my upgraded skills." The speed of his progress astounded him. Only true elites nurtured by more advanced states could improve this fast.

With 3000 DP on the line, Ves treated this fabrication task with utmost importance. He could not fail his second production. Not only would it screw up the mission, it could also leave a bad track record on his thin record. A fifty percent chance of failing a delivery was not a good way to build his reputation.

As his optimizations to the design was complete, Ves began the tedious task of starting his fabrication. First, he unpacked his raw materials and sorted them out. He checked each lot for their integrity and completeness.

Fortunately, despite having bought these materials as surplus from the open market, they had all been delivered as promised. The MTA took a dim view on such manipulations, so they guaranteed all the trades happening under their watch. With such a formidable backing to rely on, Ves had high expectations for the deliveries he paid good money for. He spent up to 18 million credits to get them to his workshop.

"Everything is prepared. Now all I need is to get in the right mood."

His modified variant was still expected to fulfill the same role. However, its changed appearance demanded a slightly different set of priorities. Ves had to add the goal of looking good to his list of things to focus on when building the mech.

"I know the design looks great. All I have to do now is to convert that virtual projection into a very real entity."

While he set a firm deadline of 7 days, Ves did not rush his fabrication. He tediously drew out the most important task, which was fabricating all of the Marc Antony's parts without any errors. His familiarity with the process along

with the consolidation of his fabrication skills allowed him to produce most parts without any issue.

The HRF armor plating took the most time to come into being, though once he knew all the knacks Ves encountered no risks in its formation. It had been designed with crude mass production in mind as the armor was supposed to be a cheap and highly processed armor variant.

To Ves, this was both an advantage and a disadvantage. The best part was that now that he knew how to form the trickier shapes, even braindead Ves could manage to produce a decent batch. However, Marlin Solutions who originally developed this formula had steered it towards making it as foolproof as possible, meaning that a lot of tedious steps in between had to be followed before the armor came into being.

In essence, its production still took a whopping two days out of his schedule. The mace and shield were relatively simple designs, yet their large mass and volume meant that it took a pretty long time for his aged 3D printer to produce all of their bulk.

As it took two-and-a-half days of fairly brisk production before he fabricated the rest of the components, Ves only had three days left for assembly. Luckily, the process of assembling a mech from its component parts was not a delicate process. Doing it right the first time laid a solid foundation for subsequent assembling runs, and as Ves only made minor changes to the design, he encountered very little issues.

The only real problem he faced at this stage was that he always had too little room for cabling and other delicate components. The Marc Antony partially inherited the crowded interior from its base model, and Ves could not do much about it even as he already made some attempts at alleviating the issue.

"This portion is the riskiest step of the fabrication cycle. I can't rush it at all. If I stuff in the cables with too much force, I'm liable to break something."

Thus, out of his expectation, Ves eventually completed the basic frame of the mech after seven-and-a-half days. While the mech looked awfully complete, Ves still had to add in Vincent's bling.

Luckily, all of the extras were nothing complicated. The lighting system was the most complicated system to install. Ves had not sealed his unfinished mech tight but left several holes in its plating. He could easily stuff in the internal lighting and emplace the wireless power transmitters in whatever nook and cranny that could fit such a small part.

The exterior lighting posed less of a problem for him. These thin, flat pieces had already been fabricated by a skillful artist Vincent selected. Ves had to admit the sharp, angled design was leagues ahead of his own pathetic attempts. The artist even managed to form them in a way that complimented the codpiece. It reinforced the masculinity of the mech.

After finishing the placement of the lights and attaching the crimson cape, Ves was left with the final piece. The codpiece lay on the ground, ready to be emplaced on his almost-finished mech. He hesitated for a moment.

"This is a bit embarrassing. Looking at it... it feels like I'm transplanting someone else's private part."

Still, in order to cap off his second ever fabrication, he had to complete this step. With a sigh, he ordered a robotic arm to grab hold of the codpiece and lift it up. The triangular decoration was not made out of exceptional materials, so the arm had no trouble lifting it up. When Ves made sure the alignment fit the design specifications, he pressed the final button and let the arm firmly attach the codpiece to its rightful place.

Ves let out a deep breath. The mech was almost completely done. He let his scanner bots scour the mech for any hidden faults while he stepped on a hover bot and lifted himself up to the cockpit. He did not forget to finish the last step.

He entered the cockpit and examined the small hole where Ves was about to place his next gem.

"What shall I choose?"

Though Ves had gathered a small collection of gems, none of them were noteworthy. Lucky still hadn't crapped out the exotic alloy he gulped out of the anonymous box that someone delivered to his address a while ago. Ves hoped that his gem cat would finish digesting the extraordinary materials and perhaps use it for this mech, but apparently he was too optimistic.

He opened the pouch he placed all of the gems he picked up so far and randomly sought out the most sparkling piece. It turned out to be an exceptionally sparkling zircon gemstone.

[Zircon of Minor Resonance]

Increases the tonal quality of a mech's weapon by 20% when installed.

At first sight, Ves thought he hit jackpot. After gathering so many gems that only boosted an attribute by one percent or less, he suddenly dug out a gem that improved something by as much as a fifth! Then he read the description closer and got disappointed. Tonal quality? Are you kidding? What the gem basically did was make a mech's weapon impact sound more pleasing!

Ask any mech pilot or designer if they cared how they sounded like. Pretty much none of them ever cared about it! Ves found the gem to be utterly useless other than looking pretty. Frankly, he was glad to get rid of it. Its appearance matched Vincent's vanity.

After installing the gem in its slot, Ves stroked the console of the mech for a moment. Sometimes, he still dreamed of piloting a mech. Then he looked at the darkened cockpit and thought to himself that he built every part of it by himself. Naturally, he used a lot of machines to get it done, but in these days that practically meant handmade.

"I'm going to miss you."

Ves left the cockpit of the mech and let the hover bot take him down. Pride swelled within him as he satisfyingly contacted the MTA. He officially finished fabricating his second mech. Now he just had to certify the mech and let Marcella ship it back to Bentheim on a priority cargo shuttle.

He opted to let the MTA's personnel pick up the finished mech without him this time. Ves doubted that Gertrude, the technician in charge, appreciated his presence.

"She's going to be pissed again when I interrupt her schedule with another certification process."

Still, Ves hoped his nascent contacts in the MTA could keep the curmudgeonly woman in check. With decent people such as Ryan Baldwin and Justin Chandler in charge of the Cloudy Curtain branch, Ves had no reason to doubt its integrity.

"By the way, that kind of begs the question why they are stationed in this backwater of a planet in the first place. They're way too good for their current posts."

Could it be that Ves was too short sighted? While the MTA didn't lack talents, he still felt as if Baldwin and Chandler's talents were wasted here. Hardly anything exciting went on in this quiet neighborhood. Perhaps they chose to be stationed here expressly for that reason. Or perhaps they were exiled.

Ves shook his head and stopped cracking his head over this issue. As a large, powerful organization that spanned the galaxy, the MTA's palace intrigue made everything that took place in the halls of Rittersberg look like child's play. An outsider like him had no business speculating about what happened deep inside the MTA.

While he waited for the certification to finish, Ves called Marcella.

The hefty woman's face popped up from his wrist projector with a tired expression. "Do you know how late it is back here in Dorum?"

"Ah, sorry. I forgot to check the local time."

"No worries, I was about to wake up soon anyway. I take it you've completed your second mech?"

"Yup, and it looks pretty good. The mech came off my assembler without a hitch, even with the extra parts."

"I've seen the designs. You didn't disappoint. I'll take care of the shipping and delivery on my end. You just make sure to get ready for your next job."

"You've already got another order lined up for me?"

Marcella shook his head. "The deal is still in its early stages. I won't expect any progress on that end for a week. All I can tell you that it's an order for multiple mechs, up to five at most possibly."

That was a very surprising piece of news. Ves still expected to meet single-mech orders. Having someone buy five complete mechs was a very serious commitment to a newly introduced design.

He calculated the sums quickly and figured out that the client could drop as much as a hundred-and-forty million credits in one go. That was a massive amount of money, and even if he left out most of that sum to cover his

expenses and Marcella's commission, that still left him with forty million credits of gross profits.

"Forty million credits..." Ves already drooled about what he could do with such a sum.

He could proactively produce and start to stockpile his mechs in advance. No longer did he have to wait for advance payments to start procuring the raw materials. With the need for an advance payment gone, his mech would be much more attractive for prospective customers to buy. Marcella could also show off the real mech instead of rely on spec sheets and projections.

"Don't celebrate too early Ves. Not anyone is willing to spend so much on a lastgen advanced mech."

Now that he thought about it, the money looked too good to be true. Spending a large amount of money in one go for a new design from a novice mech designer was crazy. Either the buyer was swimming in credits, or he added some extra demands.

"What's the catch, then?"

"The buyer is an intermediary for another party. They want to conduct the trade without involving the MTA."

That sounded like trouble. The two pieces of information were not too remarkable if they came alone, but combined and it practically screamed dirty dealings. Marcella should have known this from the start and reject the offer out of hand.

"While I might be a new designer, but I'm not desperate to the point of selling my mechs to pirates."

"Now hold on for a sec, Ves." Marcella held out her hand. "It's actually not a pirate we're selling our mechs to. The intermediary is a familiar face around

Bentheim. He's serving as an agent for some of the shadier mercenary corps, but he has a good reputation in so far that he doesn't deal with gangs with active bounties on their heads.

That abated his indignation. Instead of selling his mechs to thieves, rapists and murderers, he did business with regional powerhouses like Walter's Whalers. Was that still okay? Perhaps not, but the air of legitimacy these groups often sported made it less objectionable for Ves to produce his mechs for them. Though Ves still had a question.

"If these groups aren't so bad, why don't they approach you directly?"

"Intermediaries still serve their purposes. I have been talking to the representative on and off for the last week or so and he still hasn't leaked any details about his clients. The only thing you can do is to take a leap of faith.

Ves imagined standing atop a tall skyscraper while spreading out his arms. He ran across the roof and jumped off the lip of the roof. Would he be able to land safely, or go all splat at the end of his fall?

He resorted to his usual tactic when faced with a difficult issue. "Let me think about it. Since the deal is nowhere near being closed, let me consider it for a while longer. Just make sure they aren't doing anything too shady. I do not want to get into trouble with the authorities."

"Me too. I can assure you that I do not relish in attracting the attention of the Mech Corps. I'll be sure to vet their conditions in detail."

After talking about a few other minor issues, Ves hung up the call. Now all he needed to do was wait for his mech to be delivered to the Ricklin boy. He wondered whether his mech would see battle soon.

Ves was quite worried at Vincent's potential performance. Someone who thought it was more important to look cool than to pilot the most effective

mech was not a normal pilot. Who knew how diligently he learned how to fight with a mech.

Chapter 65: Vincent

How integral were chips in the daily life of a modern day human? Even as they slept, these silent workers played their role. They observed the time, measured the surrounding temperature and were on the lookout for any toxicants in the air.

When a person woke up, he interacted with dozens of different processors in a short succession. His power shower automatically cleaned him with the most optimal settings before drying him off without any excess heat and air.

If he was fairly well off, then his household bot would have already prepared a sumptuous breakfast for him. Though the act of automated cooking was long perfected, bots still needed a tiny bit of processing power to adapt to different ingredients.

When it was time for him to go to work, he entered his aircar if he owned one or hailed one from the streets. These basic vehicles were packed with processors of different kinds. The most high-end one was in charge of the main functions, but plenty of auxiliary modules required less calculating power. The projectors that let the person read his news or check out the latest weather were all guided by humble processors solely developed for this role.

Just this tiny slice of life of an average person showed how ubiquitous computers were in this day and age. As the dominant manufacturer of competitively priced computer chips, the Ricklin Corporation should be swimming in money.

In fact, it did. When Vincent last glanced at the company's accounting sheets, his eyes grew cross eyed at how many trillion credits the company raked in each fiscal year.

Unfortunately, no one in the Ricklin family was glad with the company's current trend. Revenue was high, but so were the expenses. To produce that many chips at the lowest possible price, the Ricklin Corporation constantly invested in its mass production capabilities. But that wasn't enough.

The company had to constantly look forward and develop faster processors. Its highly substantial R&D department always licensed newer technologies from more advanced states at practically extortionary prices and spent years trying to adapt them in a cheaper form. By the time these chips finally entered the market, the Ricklin Corporation incurred tens of billions of credits in debt.

"The company is like a hamster stuck in a wheel. No matter how far it tries to go, it always ends up at the same spot." Vincent muttered as he lounged in his recreation room.

The day of the delivery was soon upon him. The new mech that he custom-ordered from some noname kid had passed the MTA's certification process with flying colors. Vincent never thought he'd get his new mech so smoothly. He underestimated Ves.

"Tell me again why I have to resort to this older model?" He absently asked as he twirled his unruly blond hair. Despite its messy appearance, a real human stylist had personally worked on it this morning. While bots delivered consistent performance, real human workers always possessed a spark of creativity that artificial computers lacked.

Johnson, his personal assistant and 'butler' as Vincent preferred to say, calmly stated his own opinions. "Young master, choosing to purchase a more modern mech will alarm your siblings and cause them to raise their vigilance against you. By purchasing a mech based off technology from the last generation, you've successfully caused everyone keeping an eye on you to disregard your intentions."

"I take it no one inside and out is aware of my real intentions?"

"As soon as they heard that you added a codpiece to your mech, they all stopped paying attention."

Vincent smirked as his eyes sparked with indolent patience. While the rich scion still looked like a playboy, there was an edge to his personality which he did not display before around anyone else. Even Ves was successfully convinced his client had no redeeming features.

"My granddad and those old coots in the board of management will soon rue the day they pushed me out of my inheritance."

For the oldest son of a large, traditional family to be pushed aside, Vincent was humiliated beyond words. A family that passed down its leadership position from eldest to eldest since the start of Bentheim's colonization suddenly changed all rules to suit the third and youngest direct descendant.

Vincent gritted his teeth and squeezed his fist. "That hateful Catelyn. Why was she born with all those gifts?"

From the very moment of conception, things started to change. Vincent was afforded any and every luxury, so long as he listened diligently to his instructors. The amount of schoolwork he needed to memorize each day could astound any other person, but to Vincent who had crammed entire literary works since young, it was like drinking water.

The Ricklin family hid a dark secret. They engaged in extensive genetic modification to 'design' the perfect descendant. Though it was an open secret that every affluent family engaged in the practice, the Ricklin family went a step further.

By chance, one of the ancestors of the family came across a large wreck when she accompanied a priority trade shipment. The already old woman at

that time only ordered the convoy to stop and inspect the wreckage for survivors.

She never intended to stay and dig up what had happened because the shipment was time sensitive. Nevertheless, the ruined ship's origins turned out to be extremely remarkable. Through some freak accident involving extensive battle damage and an over-stressed FTL drive, the ship suffered catastrophic damage during FTL and ended up well inside a star system's gravity well.

There was no surviving such a process. All life in the ship perished without even having enough time to scream, and most of the interior of the mech got crushed. However, some smaller and more protected systems survived, enough for the ancestor to learn what a bounty the ship represented.

It turned out the ship was piloted by an exiled family line from the New Rubarth Empire. At its height, this Rubarthan lineage ruled over three ports and thirty-nine lesser star systems. Unfortunately, they somehow crossed the Emperor and lost all of their territory in one go when the Rubarthans caught them off guard with a mass invasion.

The disarrayed family barely had time to pack up their essentials and escape with their fastest starships. The wreck the ancient Ricklin elder found was one of them, and like many other escape vessels from a first-rate superstate, it possessed many redundancies.

While the botched FTL transition killed off all of the occupants, its data core was still intact, though its encryption was not a trivial matter. When the elder sneakily ordered the data core to be brought back, she redirected the floating wreck and sent it directly towards the system's sun. She wanted no trace of its existence left.

Years and eventually decades passed by while the family slowly worked on the data core's encryption. An entire generation of family heads retired their places to allow the younger generation to take the helm. The Ricklins eventually decoded the data core, but not through any exceptional effort on their part. They simply waited for the most appropriate cracking technology to advance. No encryption could ever last the test of time.

When the Ricklins finally accessed the data core, they found out it possessed data on only one topic: genetic manipulation. And not the regular kind. No, it turned out the Rubarthans were not content with the human genome alone. They very subtly incorporated DNA adapted from alien samples.

As one could imagine, this was not a simple process. The genetic code that originated from alien lifeforms always came in different formats. It took an immense amount of effort to read, analyze and adapt an alien's best attribute to a form compatible to human life.

It sounded crazy and heretical, but the Rubarthan family who funded these studies actually succeeded in incorporating such alien genes in their own test subjects. Just as they were about to extend their experiments to their own crop of descendants, the Rubarthan Emperor came in to destroy them at hand. Perhaps the research was the principal reason why the family's fortunes turned so suddenly.

In any case, long story short, the Ricklins were barely able to interpret the research results, much less replicate them even in the most advanced biolabs. Only in recent years did they achieve a limited result. Just when Vincent started his schooling, in fact.

Catelyn was the most successful clone out of thousands. Through some confluence of random factors, her gene expression sat in the sweet spot where it activated all of the good things about the alien genes while the side

effects were minimized. Whereas most of her sibling clones were stillborn or grew deformed, Catelyn quietly grew up to be a model baby.

Vincent's parents practically ignored their two naturally born sons and latched onto this aberrant new sister. Though the Ricklins never understood precisely what the alien genes did, Catelyn always distinguished herself in many remarkable ways since young. No matter if it was intelligence, ingenuity or deductive capability, Catelyn beat every record imaginable.

The family's orientation changed directions. After the devastating losses the Ricklin Corporation incurred during the last war between the Vesia Kingdom and the Bright Republic, the family desperately needed hope. Catelyn represented their best chance at revival. No one cared about Vincent or his average second brother Gilbert anymore.

Gilbert could get away from any entangling conflicts by taking the opportunity to study at a prestigious institution in a second-rate state. Though he promised he'd be back once he graduated, he never really sent any word back all these years, and no one in the family cared.

As the eldest son, Vincent was stuck in a more awkward position. He could never find any justification to flee the confines of his family's influence. Even leaving the surface of Bentheim was out of the question. He had to give ground in a different way.

His personal assistant, loyal only to him, came up with an elegant solution. With Johnson's assistance, he slowly cultivated a playboy lifestyle to the point he could not really distinguish between his roles anymore. So good was his 'acting' that the family heads were all convinced he grew up to be a piece of trash. With all the myriad scandals popping up in the news, they had the perfect excuse to dispossess him from his inheritance and pass it over to their talented wondergirl.

Naturally, Vincent was no fool and some of the more acute elders weren't either. As he took the initiative to retreat from his cherished position, the older generation didn't make it too difficult for him. Naturally, everyone except for him saved their faces.

"Well, it won't be long before I can get back at Catelyn and the rest." Vincent smirked as he was at the cusp of enacting the plan he brewed for years.

"Your new mech has arrived in the courtyard." Johnson informed him after a few minutes passed. "Shall we meet with Mrs. Bollinger?"

"Yes, let's finalize this transaction."

When Vincent and Johnson stepped out of the doors of the opulent mansion, they resumed their typical appearances. Vincent stumbled forward like he had not yet recovered from a wild night of partying, while Johnson acted as the dutiful servant who ignored everything that did not concern his young master's immediate needs.

As a veteran business woman, Marcella hid her scorn well. She was all smiles as she firmly gripped Vincent's hand, even if he needed some help with that from his butler.

"Good morning, Vincent. It's a great day today, is it?"

"You betcha. My long awaited pimp mobile has finally arrived! I can't wait to see it in the flesh."

Before they could approach the sealed container, the mansion's security personnel went to work. They inspected the container and its contents very thoroughly. After finding nothing amiss, they opened the shell and revealed the imposing form of a newly build medium mech.

"He's beautiful. Such a grand mech deserves to be worshipped." Vincent muttered as he truly grew in love with his latest purchase. "That Larkinson kid deserves a medal. I doubt anyone could have built any cooler mech."

Not everyone present admired the mech. The added frills were senseless and distracted the mech from its core purpose. The unavoidable codpiece jarred everyone's sense of how mechs ought to look like. Its presence was like a shining elephant in the room. No one had ever seen such a thing before in a modern mech. It led to many questioning gazes.

Vincent ignored all of the stares and beelined his way to the mech. An advanced hover bot with zillions of safety features already waited for him near the feet of the mech. As he climbed in the air, he passed by the codpiece. The thick, stubby triangular piece of decoration was larger than his body.

Proportionally, it looked hefty on the modified Marc Antony's frame, but it did not exaggerate its prowess too much.

"It sure is big enough." Vincent nodded in satisfaction as he finally reached the open cockpit. He scampered inside, and with familiar motions he strapped himself in. As he stared ahead, he spotted a shining blue crystal-like gem. As he caressed his finger over its surface, he pressed it in, causing the cockpit to close and the mech come to life.

Though it was safer to let a trained pilot under his employ test out the mech, Vincent wanted to do it personally. This was going to be his personal mech, and only he should have the right to pilot it. Using a mech after someone else had piloted it first felt too much like using a second-hand good. As a veritable spendthrift elite, he disdained such matters.

The neural interface connected to his brains. His mind was subjected to a myriad of foreign sensations as Vincent allowed the device to connect his brains to the various functions of his new mech. The connection settled down after a minute as all the first-time testing was complete.

"I have control over the mech. Stepping out."

The Marc Antony model stepped out of the container and into the open air. Vincent admired the heightened perspective of his new body. Despite his acting, he did not hate piloting mechs. In fact, he adored it. Ordering a custom-built mech that looked good merely provided him a convenient excuse for any future circumstances. He could simply say that all the other mechs were too ugly.

As everyone else stepped back in case Vincent lost control, which they thought was likely, the Marc Antony began to exercise its range of motion. The mech performed its actions with smooth motions. After the mech picked up its accompanying mace and shield, it made some rudimentary attack patterns. Nothing malfunctioned.

After half an hour of running around and testing each weapons at the practice range for the guards, Vincent finally hopped out of the cockpit with a satisfied expression. He met Marcella and signed the final contracts.

"And that's all of it." Marcella said with a smile as she instructed her employees to process the newly signed contracts back in her office. "If I may say, it was a wise choice to buy from Mr. Larkinson. The man is young, but he possesses integrity most other Bentheimers have in short supply. If you wish to purchase another mech to fill up your stables, feel free to call me up."

Vincent laughed awkwardly. "I've scratched my itch for a good-looking mech. I don't expect to buy another machine, for now."

One mech was enough for his plan to come into fruition, Vincent thought to himself. Still, on the outside he acted all smiles as he made a few crass jokes. Marcella hardly appreciated them and disentangled herself from the conversation as fast as possible while still remaining polite.

As a guard led the broker back to the front gates, Vincent and Johnson stared up at the new mech.

"It's going to be dangerous from here on out. The storm you will spark will engulf the entire Republic." Johnson cautioned his employer again, now that they were about to take more substantial risks.

"It doesn't matter how many trees will get knocked over. As long as mine is still standing at the end of it, all of my actions aren't in vain."

Chapter 66: Novice

An anxious Ves impatiently waited for the news to arrive. After more than a day of biting his fingernails, his comm lighted up with a series of incoming messages.

The first one came from his bank. Marcella passed on the rest of Vincent's payment for his new mech. His eyes almost popped when he saw how much the young Ricklin paid for his customized combat machine.

"Thirty-four million credits. That's at six million more than the regular price."

For just a couple of days work, an extra six million credits in his pocket was an extremely generous payment. Vincent got badly ripped off by Marcella. Out of the thirty-four million credits, Marcella sliced 3.4 million credits as her share, leaving him with a remaining profit of 12.8 million credits, which was still a pretty huge amount. As Ves still enjoyed about one-and-a-half million credits of pocket money, he stashed all of his new gains in his piggy bank.

His savings account now swelled to twenty-four million bright credits. His dream of replacing his second-hand equipment and acquiring some good licenses was one step closer.

"And that's not all. The real reward has yet to come."

He opened the subsequent messages sent by the silent but ever-present System.

[You have received 34 Design Points for selling a physical mech of your design.]

The small amount of credits he received for a single sale failed to sate his appetite. He skipped right to the other message.

[Congratulations for partially completing the mission. As a mech designer, you must learn to accommodate the needs of your clients and do your best to incorporate his wishes in your creation. A lack of ability is no excuse.]

Ves was afraid of this. He only earned a partial completion for the mission due to screwing up the simple lighting design. He should have contracted an artist himself instead of letting Vincent do all of the work.

[For satisfying two out of three of your client's requests, you have received a Deluxe Concentration Candy and 2000 Design Points.]

"Yes! Haha, I still got the candy!" Ves celebrated with glee. He expected his DP reward to be cut, but keeping the candy worth 0.5 attribute points intact was a pleasant surprise. "Only, why is it for Concentration?"

Certainly, Ves did not disregard the Concentration attribute. It allowed him to work long stretches of time while holding on to the same intent. If his attention span was too short, he'd easily be distracted and lose the perfect state to harmonize the X-Factor of a new design. Concentration also affected many other processes in a positive way.

Still, these improvements weren't able to provide concrete results. X-Factor was always nebulous at the best of times, and Ves did not expect his efforts in this area to improve very quickly. The lack of direction plagued him for a long time, though his latest work for Vincent taught him that perhaps it might be wise to reconsider gender for mechs.

"Man, if I had gotten intelligence instead, my learning capacity would have jumped through the roof."

A man could wish. If necessary, he could buy the candy from the Store, though the prices the heartless System charged were sky high. He'd rather invest in his skills than raising his attributes. This spending strategy provided the best results in the short and medium term.

"Bottoms up."

He gulped down the candy in a single toss. The candy tasted sour, and it spread to his entire mouth. Then everything in his mouth started to burn a bit, causing Ves to fall and hold his head. Somehow the sour taste drilled through his flesh and converged on his brain. The pain became excruciating. Lucky even turned alarmed and meowed in panic at the sight.

Only after several minutes did the entire process end. Ves took deep breaths as he tried to recover from the strange ordeal the System put him in. He was going to have to be more careful eating these strengthened candies next time.

He flexed his mind a little, but did not see any obvious results from the 0.5 point bump in Concentration. He shrugged. It might take a more concerted action to feel the effects.

Since it was a long time since he last inspected his Status, he called it up to plan his next actions.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Novice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 2136

Attributes

Strength: 0.7

Dexterity: 0.7

Endurance: 0.7

Intelligence: 1.2

Creativity: 1

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

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

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Novice

[Mathematics]: Incompetent

[Mechanics]: Apprentice - [Jury Rigging II] [Speed Tuning II]

[Metallurgy]: Apprentice

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

[Physics]: Novice - [Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization II]

Evaluation: A stalled mech designer languishing at the entry gates.

Even the System thought he was stagnant for too long. His skills and attributes had rarely moved forward even after several weeks. His virtual designs in Iron Spirit barely earned him any DP even with the lowest possible prices set on them. Only the occasional 5-star mech sale bumped up his DP significantly.

"Now that I have a windfall of more than 2000 DP, I should use it to progress my stalling status."

The System still considered Ves to be a novice mech designer. This term used to be appropriate when he was still a raw newcomer, but with two confirmed real mech sales under his belt, it now sounded demeaning.

The industry treated novice mech designers rather poorly. Novices always flooded the labor market after they graduated each year. Without any wealth or connections, these naive, hopeful designers usually got a huge shock when they saw that employers almost never hired them to design mechs straight away.

These novices had nowhere else to go. The big firms all heartlessly exploited them as excellent mech technicians, dangling the possibility of promotion down the line in front of their faces. It would take many decades before they ever got the chance to sit behind the design table.

Only after designing a commercial variant off an existing base model and selling it a couple of times did he graduate from that lowly status. The MTA likely updated their files on him to reflect his change of status. In official terms, he graduated from a novice into an Apprentice Mech Designer.

Still, the System didn't acknowledge his accomplishments. It paid more emphasis to his capabilities, which did not change significantly since the start. Oh, in absolute terms, he improved in several ways. But his skills still remained within the realm of beginner mech designers.

"If I want to become an Apprentice Mech Designer, then I have to push up one of my core skills to Journeyman level."

Right now, Ves reached Apprentice level in Assembly, Business, Mechanics and Metallurgy. If he wanted to shore up his foundations properly, then he

should upgrade his Physics to Apprentice level as well. The 1000 DP price tag for that action swayed his hand.

"My ability to design mechs will only improve marginally if I bump up my Physics skill. With my DP cut in half, I can't upgrade any other skill to Journeyman. That will delay my progress too much."

While foundation was important, Ves lacked the time to develop all of his skills in an even manner.

"It's not too bad if I have holes in my knowledge base. I can easily fill them up later. It's more important I find something to excel at quickly."

Though Ves decided to focus on balancing speed and armor, his all-important Physics skills still had ways to go. He focused instead on Mechanics and Metallurgy. Advancing either of these skills provided him with benefits.

"Mechanics is the core skill of any mech. A mech is a collection of many moving parts. If I improve this skill, I can make a mech run smoother even if it carries many complex parts."

Metallurgy on the other hand acted more nebulous. It increased his knowledge of the property of all kinds of metals, but whether he could apply them was still a question. Though essential in developing or modifying new armor systems, Ves had no foundation in this area. He was not planning to develop his own armor systems anytime soon.

Thus, the choice was easy. He decisively entered the Skill Tree and upgraded his Mechanics skill.

The moment he did so, the System came alive.

[You have upgraded your Mechanics skill to Journeyman. Please stand by for high density knowledge transfer.]

"What is high density-"

It was as if a rocket blew apart his mind. The mental assault arrived so suddenly that Ves instantly blacked out.

An unknown amount of time passed by. Ves eventually managed to wake up to a worried Lucky bumping its foreleg against his nose.

"Haha, I'm not a goner yet, little buddy."

After reassuring Lucky that he was safe and sound, Ves groggily scratched his head and tried to inspect his newly Mechanics skill.

An ocean of newly acquired knowledge streamed into his consciousness. It was as if wonderful world of applied mechanics had opened its door to him. He learned many scattered tidbits of insights that combined represented a terrifying package that changed the way he saw mechs.

"I never fully appreciated the alternate forms of mechs."

The main benefit of Journeyman-level Mechanics was that he gained a deeper insight into the workings of non-humanoid mechs. He learned the essentials how animal and bird-shaped mechs took advantage of the properties of their design scheme

"It is truly a matter of imitating nature's perfect works."

That was not to say that designers specializing in mechanics copied animal shapes blindly. They only chose the most optimal species and further refined the design to accommodate non-native elements such as thrusters or weapon mounts.

The things Ves gained not only benefited his ability to design animal mechs. Humanoid mechs came in different weight classes and shapes. There was an intricate connection between the two.

A designer usually modeled the frames of their original designs after real human athletes. For example, a designer intending to make a new light mech

design would hire a runner or a sprinter and model his motions precisely. For heavy mechs, they turned to weight lifters and other strength athletes.

Sure, a designer didn't have to reference a real human all the time. But that simply resulted in massive amounts of number crunching as they tried to simulate millions of possible shapes before they finally end up with something satisfactory.

Now that he broke the threshold holding him back to novice level, Ves was curious if he succeeded in raising his profession. Before he could call his Status again, the System interrupted his thoughts.

[You have met the requirements to promote your profession from Novice Mech Designer to Apprentice Mech Designer.]

Ves cursed out loud. The System refused to give him a promotion. He already imagined the System's next action.

[You have received a new Promotion Mission. Please enter the Missions page to browse the details.]

[Promotion Mission]

Mission: Acknowledge a Master

Difficulty: A-Rank

Prerequisites: Promote a main skill to Journeyman

Description

No Apprentice Mech Designer has ever reached this level without guidance. A master teaches more than simple theory. He or she also prevents their apprentices from going astray. The guidance of an experienced hand is essential in forming a stellar design philosophy. You must seek out a Master Mech Designer and convince this person to take you in as an apprentice or disciple within a month.

Failure condition: Fail to apprentice yourself to any Master Mech Designer within 1 month of receiving this mission. You will not be able to promote again for 1 year.

Reward: Your profession is upgraded to Apprentice Mech Designer, which comes with increased benefits and privileges.

An A-rank mission. The System sure didn't make it easy for Ves. He hardly had any idea where to start.

"Does the Bright Republic even host a Master Mech Designer?"

The question was a valid one, as Master Mech Designers usually enjoyed an eminent status akin to royals. A mere third-rate state such as the Bright Republic or the Vesia Kingdom possessed no means to attract and retain a designer of such a caliber. These masters were all capable of designing mechs that could win entire wars. The amount of money they charged for every single design reached a dizzying level.

"Where can I find a master?"

The System remained silent even after Ves prodded it several times for any suggestions, so he gave up that avenue and turned to the galactic net. He inputted his search term and let the net deliver him a list of nearby masters, at least those that bothered to show themselves in public.

As expected, the Bright Republic did not host any masters. Sixty years ago was the last time a Master Mech Designer visited the Republic, and that was only to pick up an exceptional genius. None of the other backwater states in the barren Komodo Star Sector hosted any masters, at least in public.

"There might be one or two masters hiding in some corner of the sector, but I have no way of tracking them down."

The mission deserved its A-rank rating. The scarcity of Master Mech Designers forced him to cast a wider net. He set his sights on the pair of second-rate states situated in the core of the star sector. They monopolized the region filled with the most vitality. They maintained their power by exploiting the abundant life-giving stars and resources in their borders.

Of the two local second-rate states, the Hexadric Hegemony favored the Vesia Kingdom. Ruled by a council of six, they rarely took action, but if they did it was bound to be big. The Autocracy was a sleeping giant that no one wanted to wake up prematurely.

The much plainer-sounding Friday Coalition was much friendlier in comparison. Their culture was rich and varied as they used to be a collection of rare ethnic groups chased out from more settled parts of the galaxy. Such ordeals had scarred their national psyche, but to their credit they opened their doors instead of slamming them shut.

Many promising geniuses from the surrounding third-rate states tended to flock to the Coalition to seek brighter futures. Many of his competitors in the Fusion Cup in fact attended one of the many elite institutions of the Coalition.

"There's bound to be masters in the Friday Coalition. The only problem is gaining an audience with them. I can't just come up to a master's doorstep."

The value of a Master Mech Designer did not lose out to national treasures. Each and every master's life was strictly regulated. Not even an errant fly could get near such vaunted people.

As Ves trawled through the galactic net for masters, he finally encountered an opportunity.

LEEMAR INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ANNUAL OPEN DESIGN COMPETITION

The annual contest hosted by the Leemar Institute was open to every designer below the age of thirty. Though most contestants still attended the Institute, each year plenty of outsiders who studied at other colleges converged in Leemar in order to showcase their talents. Many people and businesses attended the grand event as well, as the competition often unveiled diamonds in the rough.

From the articles describing past competitions, it was not unheard of for a novice mech designer to be noticed by an attending master.

"The open competition is in twenty days. My schedule is going to be tight if I want to travel all the way to the Friday Coalition."

Ves couldn't just leave his workshop behind. He was running a business now. He had to make arrangements.

Chapter 67: Bodyguard

First, he called up Marcella. If the broker already had a deal lined up, then Ves was in big trouble.

"It's not a responsible move to spring this road trip on me all of a sudden." Marcella icely said. "Besides, do you think you even stand a chance? The Leemar competition is one of the fiercest stages in the entire star sector."

Ves shrugged. He had zero confidence in winning anything before he upgraded his mechanics, but now was different. "I have my own advantages. I think I can hold my own."

Despite Marcella's constant harranging, Ves remained steadfast in his determination to go to Leemar. Eventually the broker threw up her arms.

"Fine, be that way. Don't make me see you again only to tell you I told you so. I'll slow down and stretch out the negotiations for the current deal in progress. Maybe this trip might not be an entirely bad thing. If you stand out and perform well at Leemar, your business will pick up remarkably."

Unspoken was the fact that Marcella really held little confidence in Ves. Though he impressed him enough to do business with him, that was accounting his potential. Too little time had passed for him to really grow into his own. On paper, he stood zero chance of even reaching the top 1000 in Leemar.

Marcella took the time to explain the nuances of visiting the Friday Coalition. Unlike the Bright Republic, the Coalition is a lot more vigilant and scrutinized outsiders more strictly. The citizens also treated immigrants from third-rate states rather poorly, at least until they have proved themselves. All in all, Ves should keep to himself and do nothing to attract the ire of his hosts.

"Even if the Friday Coalition is one of the weakest second-rate states in the galaxy, it has still reached a height the Bright Republic can never achieve. They consider themselves the true rulers of the Komodo Star Sector and are not shy in demonstrating their might."

Ves eventually hung up after receiving an earful of caution from Marcella. He frowned a little. Did he underestimate the Coalition? It started as a refuge for persecuted people and still widely advertised their generous immigration policies for talented professionals. They blatantly poached the best and brightest of the surrounding third-rate states for centuries, keeping smaller states like the Bright Republic a remote backwater.

"There's more to the Coalition than meets the eye." He concluded. The only things he knew about the Coalition came from history books and the occasional drama broadcast. Now that he thought about it, the Republic probably didn't dare publish any material that was critical of the Coalition.

"I've got to ensure my safety somehow. Travelling alone to Leemar as a single mech designer is too dangerous. Though I'm not anything hot, someone might still try to find trouble with me if I'm all alone and defenseless."

It wasn't unheard of for vulnerable mech designers to get poached through one way or another. Simple physical intimidation was enough to make most of them sign a restrictive contract. After all, they spent their entire lives designing war machines instead of improving their personal combat skills.

"I should bring a bodyguard."

As Ves expected his trip to take up to two months, the price of hiring a bodyguard shouldn't be too exorbitant. "Luckily I completed the sale of my second mech. I'm not short on credits."

The only question was who to hire. Should he go to Bentheim and contract a mercenary? "Well, maybe I don't need to travel that far. If I recall, SASS should be a security company that originates from a second-rate state. Perhaps they extend the reach of their services to the Friday Coalition as well. It's worth a try."

He activated his comm and contacted the representative of Sanyal-Ablin. Miss Robyn's pretty face emerged from the projector with a smile.

"Ah, Mister Larkinson, a pleasure to see you again. How can I help you?"

"I'm planning a short trip to Leemar in order to take part in the mech design competition there. I'd like to ask if you can provide a bodyguard to accompany me there?"

Robyn maintained her smile though some tension appeared in her eyes. "We do offer short-term contracts for guards, but if you wish to extend this service to the Coalition, then it will cost you quite a bit. Your guard has to meet very high standards in order to cope with the caliber of opponents he or she may face."

"Give me a number."

She paused a little while she consulted some numbers. "Around nine-and-a-half million credits for a two-month contract."

He almost spurted blood at that exorbitant price. That was half a mech's worth of money!

"Do you have any more affordable options?"

"None that our company allows. This is already one of the cheapest quotes from our Coalition branch. I don't know if you are aware, but the bright credit is a very weak currency compared to the coalition credit. The exchange rates are unfavorable because it just costs more to do business in the Coalition."

Miss Robyn had a point. Ves knew that SASS wasn't out to screw him. The Coalition had access to abundant exotic resources. They used their massive population base to exploit these riches and build up their military and economy.

Merely the disparity in mech armies sent home how the Coalition trumped almost every other state. While the Bright Republic mainly used the cheapest currentgen mechs as their frontline models, the Coalition featured the very best currentgen mechs as their basic units.

It was rumoured that many elite commanders had already transitioned to nextgen models. Even the best mercenaries had access to mechs that could easily trounce the best of the Republic's Mech Corps.

"Let me consider my options for a moment. I'll contact you later in order to tell you what I've decided."

"Very well, but I should warn you that you won't get a better price anywhere else. Even if someone were to offer you a bargain, you will find that whoever gets sent will not be able to keep up in Coalition territory."

As the two closed the call, Ves thought back about her words. She sounded very certain that Ves would not be able to contract a capable guard.

He considered calling Melinda or someone else in the Larkinson family, but halted in his steps. Most of the capable Larkinson pilots served in the Mech Corps. It wasn't possible to ask them to leave their stations and accompany him on his trip.

A casual search on the galactic net revealed prices that Ves found hard to stomach. Robyn's words echoed in his head as he found that many security escorts came with a correspondingly high price tag. Expressed in coalition credits, it didn't sound too bad, but when converted to bright credits it was enough to drain all of his savings.

One of the biggest reasons why the price was so high was because short-term contracts came with a lot of upfront costs. It was more economical to contract a bodyguard over a longer period of time, though Ves would never do such a thing. He simply didn't have the money.

"It all comes down to money. Without enough credits, I can't gain any meaningful power."

He hadn't even travelled to the Friday Coalition and already he had a first-hand taste of its superiority. If Ves translated the relative strengths of its economic might to military strength, then the result painted a bleak picture.

Ves faced perhaps the most significant choice concerning this trip. Personally, he thought the risk of encountering a pirate raid or some other unpleasant business was not that big. Spending an excessive amount of credits allocated for future purchases might turn out to be a wasted effort.

"It's not like I'm going off the beaten path. Leemar is one of the core planets of the Coalition and the space routes are well-patrolled."

What Ves simply couldn't stomach was spending ten million credits for a bodyguard that only accompanied him for a whopping two months. Perhaps someone born with a silver spoon like Vincent might accept the price without batting an eyelid, but Ves was brought up in a frugal environment. Despite his father's generous salary, Ryncol never spent any of it. In fact, Ves still had no clue where his father stashed his savings.

In the end, while he didn't doubt the integrity of SASS, he simply wasn't willing to throw away his hard-earned money.

He considered his alternatives. Pretty much all of the reputable security companies offered the same baseline prices. Some of the shadier firms

offered cheaper rates, but Ves read enough horror stories on the net to realize that they posed the greatest threat to him if he enlisted their services.

Several scams existed where a person and his guards that happened to encounter a gang of pirates that overpowered them. While the two sides acted like they were enemies, they were actually in cahoots with each other. Though this sort of thing didn't happen often, it was enough of a possibility for Ves to rule out this option.

He wanted a guard that was cheap, loyal and strong enough to deter the most casual riffraff from starting any trouble. "With my budget and circumstances, I'll be lucky if I get two out of three. Now where can I find such a chump?"

His list of contacts was woefully small. Out of the names in his list, one group had potential, if barely. Walter's Whalers might be a small-time gang that ruled over a single rural planet, but they were not antagonistic to his mech business. They shared a common interest in helping Cloudy Curtain develop its economy.

Despite his better instincts telling him that it was a terrible idea, Ves decisively chose to contact Dietrich, the so-called Little Boss.

"Hey hey! Look who's back! What's up, my man Ves?" Dietrich greeted him over the comm even as he was doing... something that required him to discard all of his clothes.

The smile on Ves' face grew cramped. "I'd like to inquire you about some business, but if you're indisposed, I can call you back later."

"Oh no, I'm not too busy. I'm the master of multitasking, baby!" The Little Boss boasted, and several enthusiastic voices cheered in the background. "Just spit it out. My ears are always open to you."

Ves already regretted contacting Dietrich. Perhaps he should reconsider Sanyal-Ablin's offer? But when the price tag came into view, his eyes hardened. He didn't want to waste his precious savings.

Chapter 68: Harrier

Surprisingly, the Little Boss was receptive to the idea. "I always wanted to see the Coalition with my own eyes. My old man always nags about the power of the gangs operating in the center of the star sector. It's about time I take a look."

Ves did not expect Dietrich to offer to come in person. "It's not necessary for you to accompany me. I can make do with any decent pilot."

"No no no, you deserve better! While I'm not as good as the old coots who have been with my father for centuries, I can still hold my own!"

After several attempts to change his escort, Ves gave up. At least the Little Boss offered to accompany him for free. Though his caliber was nowhere near a bodyguard worth ten million credits, he was not a pushover. That should be enough.

"Say, I'd like to ask a favor from you." Dietrich smiled with more than a little slyness. "Since you're a fancy designer, you should know a lot about mechs, right? I'd like you to tinker with my mech. Just a tune-up is okay."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. It will take time, and I need extra materials-"

"Haha, no worries. We have a small stockpile of spare parts. You can grab anything you want as long as my mech gets better. As for the time, well, we both know it won't take an entire month to reach Leemar unless you take the cheapest spacelines."

Since he was loaded with money for the moment, Ves already reserved a first-class seat aboard a premium spaceline. It took little effort for Dietrich to reserve the seat next to him and also pay for the privilege to bring along his mech. Naturally, the war machine would be safed and stowed in the cargo section of the giant passenger ship.

"Alright, just head over to our base in Freslin. You know where it is. I'll clear you to use anything from our workshop and storage."

As Ves hung up, he sighed. Seems like he was pretty much stuck with Dietrich. Besides, it might not be a bad thing to develop a closer relationship with the heir of Walter's Whalers. His men could keep an eye on his workshop

in his absence. He didn't fully trust his basic automatic security systems to keep out determined thieves.

After a brief trip aboard an aircar, Ves arrived at the same dilapidated-looking base where he first met Dietrich. Thankfully Dietrich looked fresh this time, wearing a smart suit that belied the power in his limbs. Unlike Vincent, the Little Boss was a warrior to the core. He did not let his excesses affect his combat capability.

"Right, you're finally here! Lemme bring you to my mech. You're going to love her. She's been my beauty for well over two years. She's a veritable classic!"

Dietrich unceremoniously dragged Ves into the rusting workshop area. Several oil-stained technicians were conducting haphazard maintenance on the mechs stowed inside. They walked up to the very end of the workshop which revealed an imposing silhouette of a medium flier.

Well, Dietrich was right in one aspect. His mech was a 'classic'. It was actually a National Aeromotives Harrier VCX-4B. While it was a currentgen design, the design came out at the very start of this generation's commencement. It was an aged design with a couple of premium features.

National Aeromotives only entered the mech market a generation ago. Its main products were still shuttles and aircars, so their accumulated knowledge concerning flight was very substantial. Besides brief forays into land mechs such as the Caesar Augustus, all the other mechs NA manufactured specialized in flight.

The Harrier was not a typical workhorse unit, though it shared many features with standard currentgen frontline models.

It focused mainly on endurance and therefore relied on fuel rather than direct energy to sustain its airtime. Its beefy flight system was capable of switching

between energy saving mode and high intensity flight mode at the cost of weighing a bit more than other flight systems.

This made the medium mech carry only a fairly light amount of armor for a medium mech. Still, NA always excelled in developing heat-resistant armor, so the Harrier fared pretty well against energy weapons.

As for its weapon complement, it mainly relied on its ballistic rifle to dish out the hurt. While it weighed down the mech even more, it allowed the Harrier to devote most of its energy to power its flight. The Harrier was capable of carrying a sufficient amount of shells if it decided to forgo most melee weaponry.

Dietrich proudly approached the mech's foot and slapped his palm against its armor. "Look at this beauty. Can't you see how lovingly I treated her all this time?"

Ves had to admit that the VXC-4B was well-maintained. Evidently the technicians under the employ of the Whalers didn't dare slack off concerning Dietrich's personal mech. It must be the only time they actually earned their pay.

As Ves had little experience working on finished mechs, he might as well take the chance to study the Harrier. He borrowed the workshop's diagnostic tools to scan the Harrier from top to bottom. The readings told him that the mech had over a quarter of its parts replaced, and not all of the new parts were standard. In particular, it was difficult to get replacement armor plates from a source other than National Aeromotives directly. Naturally they charged sky-high prices for replacements.

With his vastly improved Mechanics skill, Ves noted that whoever repaired the armor had some skills, but did not account for every factor. He guessed that

the mech's center of balance was slightly out of alignment, which affected a host of things that did not result in anything good.

"I can see it needs some work. If you don't mind, I'll be taking some things apart and replacing them with something else."

"Be my guest, Ves. That why I've invited you here for. As long as you can make my baby run better, I'm okay with anything."

It was reassuring to hear Dietrich place so much trust in Ves. For now, their interests aligned. The bonds between the two tightened as they mutually sought to take advantage of each other. Ves wanted to shelter under the umbrella of the Whalers, while Dietrich sought to enlist a high-end engineer.

Ves went to work on the Harrier. He first took out all of the replacement armor and set them aside. He then inspected the internals underneath and made a few calculations. If he wanted to reset the center of balance, then he had to move stuff around. One bad habit that National Aeromotives never shook off is that it inherited Jason Kozlowski's penchant of stuffing too much goodies in very little space.

Fortunately, the Harrier wasn't so bad in that regard. NA certainly tried to curb their habits as much as possible so Ves didn't have to risk bumping into something delicate when he moved a couple of minor components around.

One limiting factor was that over a quarter of the internals were dedicated to supporting the flight system. Ves lacked the expertise to play around with these components without screwing up the mech's flight capabilities. His background in ballistic weaponry was also too shallow for him to tweak the ballistic rifle, let alone understand it completely.

"I should try to plug this hole a bit once I have some DP to spare. I can't rely on beginner's knowledge concerning weaponry forever if I want to keep up with the higher echelons of mech designers."

Overall, the mech technicians had done a good job keeping the Harrier in shape. Ves did not have to correct any glaring errors, just minor misjudgments.

He did add one little surprise. His hands sneaked into the pouch carrying all of Lucky's gems and withdrew a dusky jasper. The round gem's appearance evoked a layered landscape, though Ves paid little attention to that. The unassuming gem had a property of improving the mech's agility by 1%. He sneakily installed the gem inside a well-protected alcove where technicians were least likely to inspect.

"Hopefully it will do its job." Ves muttered and turned his attention to putting the mech back together.

He took the replacement armor plates to a hammering tool and lightly worked them over so they conformed a little better to the Harrier. The mistake the technicians made was to think it was sufficient picking any random armor plating that weighed about the same and shape it in the exact way as the old one. In reality, each armor exhibited different properties and should always be treated from a fresh perspective.

After Ves put the armor plates back in, he requested Dietrich to enter the cockpit and test the mech. The re-tuned machine moved fluently and with grace despite the large flight system getting in the way of its movements.

"It feels great! It's like all of my aches and sores have gone away."

The improvement was marginal, but every little bit counted. Both Ves and Dietrich were satisfied with the work. While the mech's specs hardly moved, Dietrich piloted his mech more naturally.

Ves realized that tuning existing mechs might not be a waste of time. It took very little effort and investment on his part to bring up a mech back to full functionality. If Ves ever ran into a dry spell of orders, he could advertise his

abilities as a mech tuner and earn some pocket money by tinkering with older mechs such as the Harrier.

After making sure nothing blew up in their faces, Ves said goodbye to Dietrich and finished his other preparations. He stopped by at Sanyal-Ablin's office and paid a little extra money to keep his security suite functioning even when he was away for an extended period of time.

"It is regretful that you declined our offer to escort you to Leemar." Robyn added after they dealt with this matter. "While the main space routes of the Coalition are well-patrolled, nothing is absolute. And that isn't even taking into consideration what can happen planetside."

"I really do wish I can hire your bodyguard, but my financial situation simply doesn't allow it." Ves excused himself as he stood and left for the exit.

"However, that doesn't mean I will pass you by in the future. Once I get a good volume of sales, I'll be sure to take advantage of your other services."

"That sounds wonderful, Mr Larkinson. We are always ready to serve your needs."

When Ves returned to his workshop, he packed up his luggage and made sure to stow away all the loose tools and bots. He turned off and set the 3D printer and assembler into hibernation mode. As Ves turned off the lights, he wondered how much would change once he returned from Leemar.

"Hopefully I'll come back as a triumphant apprentice to a renowned master."

Ves had a fitful night of sleep as his excitement was hard to suppress. He lived, studied and worked in the Bright Republic for his entire life. Never had he stepped foot on a star beyond the borders of his familiar state.

Chapter 69: The incident

The Ricklins gathered at an open field next to Vincent's mansion. Normally, the elders of the vaunted family never paid attention to Vincent. However, the

duel he so loudly proclaimed in the news inadvertently involved the family's honor.

Some bystanders might become surprised to see someone cared about Vincent's reputation for once. The difference from previous situations was that Vincent only disgraced himself with dubious lifestyle choices so far. How could anything he do be any worse?

The key difference involved mechs. Values such as honor, bravery and service to your state were intertwined with modern society. As disgraceful Vincent had already been, chickening out a duel not once but twice would smear their name to such an extent that they'd start to lose business opportunities.

"Where the coward who calls himself a mech pilot!?" A booming voice broadcasted from a tall and bulky heavy mech. "For all his bragging, he better be here on time! I don't want to miss my own victory party."

At both sides of the field stood two groups of spectators. The smaller group was obviously the Ricklins, along with a smattering of Vincent's playboy friends. On the other side of the field stood a similar group of elders and young second generation princes. It was evident without saying that Vincent attracted the ire of the backing of his opponent.

Keeping both sides safe were guards and security screens. Scores of technicians were busy preparing the field by setting up strengthened security screens that did not lose out to the powerful shields that kept arena battles contained. Just beyond the perimeter were scores of patrolling mechs. No outsider would have the opportunity to sneak close.

Within the core of Ricklin elders sat a dainty, fresh-eyed maiden. Her petite body contrasted remarkably with her predatory blue eyes. She flipped her exquisite blond locks and yawned.

"When will my idiot brother arrive?" Catelyn asked one of her many attendants. "It's almost time to start."

"Young Miss, word has just arrived that Vincent has boarded his new mech. He should be here in a couple of minutes."

"Always late to the party I see. As usual."

The young heiress of the Ricklin line thought this duel was a waste of time. Vincent had no skill in piloting mechs despite possessing the requisite aptitude. Their descendants never produced potentates, thus they never valued honor and duty. What was the point of dying in combat when you could pay someone else to do it in your stead? Money was the real road to power. Personal combat prowess was irrelevant in her eyes.

Nevertheless, just because the Ricklins took a dim view on duels didn't mean that others thought the same. In this modern, mech-obsessed age, to receive a challenge and refuse outright was a sign of cowardice. To issue a subsequent challenge and not show up was a sign that your entire family line was craven and untrustworthy.

Catelyn gnashed her teeth, the force of which could crack any baseline human's teeth. After many years of lying low, Vincent had gone overboard with his excessive personality and crossed the line. It was a mistake long in the making, but the Ricklins were blindsided when it finally happened. Even her vaunted intellect hadn't anticipated such an incident due to her innate disdain for her older and genetically inferior brother.

When Vincent finally stomped over with his new mech, everyone stopped their small talk and gaped at the sight. A majestic black, red and golden mech approached the improvised arena with immeasurable confidence. It was as if it mistook the astonishment from the crowd with worship.

"What. Is. That?" Catelyn growled.

"It appears to be... a codpiece."

The modified Marc Antony made for a unique sight. While the cape and embedded lights were bad enough, the extra piece of equipment mounted at the front of the waist attracted everyone's attention. No one could get their head around why a mech needed a codpiece.

"You're a goner, Turin, because I have something you don't!" Vincent confidently boomed out of his brand new mech's speakers. "There's no way a man can lose to a eunuch!"

The situation escalated from there. Turin, the pilot of the heavy knight, raged inside the cockpit. "You... clown! You've gone too far! I'll beat you up and kick that stupid organ into scrap!"

"Hahahaha! I don't need to listen to a sissy hiding in a heavy mech like you! I bet yours is so small that you feel the need to compensate by-"

"That's enough! I'm going to shut your mouth!" Turin yelled back as he exploded into action.

The crowd was caught off-guard by the heavy mech's impulsive action. The technicians who were busy installing the security screens quickly rushed their work in order to safeguard their clients. A couple of knights stepped closer and stood in front of the crowd in order to shield them from any errant shots or flying debris.

Catelyn's head guard stared worriedly at the charging heavy knight. "Perhaps it is better to step back. We cannot trust these security screens to shield us completely."

"Yes, let's. There is no need to witness this barbarity this close."

The Ricklins calmly walked away, intent on enlarging the buffer between them and the impending violence.

Meanwhile, the heavy knight lumbered closer to the Marc Antony, which still stood as if it was preening into the sun. Just as the heavy knight was about to collide with the medium mech, something inexplicable happened.

The heavy knight adjusted its course and avoided Vincent's mech. Instead, it continued to careen forward without any sign of stopping.

"What is happening?"

"Did he miss on purpose?!"

"Turin isn't stopping! He's going to collide against the security screen!"

The hastily erected security screen broke like a pane of glass when the multiton heavy mech barreled right through. Its momentum bled off, but the knight resumed its stride and collided its shield against a nearby Ricklin mech.

Chaos ensued as many other mechs suffered from surprise attacks. Most of the mechs stationed in the field came from Vincent and Turin's retinue. Many of these mechs inexplicably suffered from malfunctions and shut down just as they stepped forward to stop the madness.

It was not that the Ricklins thought to bring other guards. As they assigned these guards to Vincent themselves, they were assured of their ironclad loyalty. While their loyalty might not be in question, the local technicians who maintained their mechs were obviously different.

Thus, many mechs found themselves frozen and unable to move at all. Only some mechs brought from the outside still functioned properly and moved to stop Turin and Vincent's rampage.

"Young miss! Vincent and Turin have gone crazy! They're assassinating you!"

"I can see that for myself, you dummy! Let's go!"

The group of pampered elites scrambled to flee. They approached the nearby site where they parked their luxury aircars, only for Catelyn to halt.

"Stop!"

Despite her youth, most Ricklins with decades of experience under their belt obeyed. They turned to her as if she was their only hope.

"Who designated the parking area?"

"As far as I know, Vincent's personal assistant made all the arrangements. I'm fairly certain that Johnson is the one who directed us to park over there."

"Then it isn't safe. Who knows how many explosives these rebels have planted underneath. Let's turn in a different direction!"

As Catelyn's words made sense, none argued otherwise. Despite the temptation offered by the aircars, this was evidently a planned assassination.

More evidence came from the chaos happening at the edge of the field. An outside party engaged most of the perimeter guard mechs that were still intact. From the amount of noise the distant battle generated, the terrorists came in ample numbers.

"Spread out! Don't bundle up too close!"

While Turin engaged the closest mechs, Vincent finally made his move. His shoulder-mounted missile launchers expended their entire payload in one go. The deadly guided projectiles aimed straight at Caitlyn and the other Ricklin elders.

A couple of still-functional elite guards jumped in the way with their shields. Just as they braced themselves for impact, a couple of the projectiles accelerated with such force that they pushed the mechs aside.

"Those are concussive missiles!"

The rest of the missiles also displayed unusual traits by smoothly going around any mechs in the way. Only anti-missile fire was effective in stopping them. Just as the surviving volley landed at the group of panicking Ricklins,

the final guard mech threw out his shield and used its own body to block the final payloads.

"Ahh!"

The shockwaves threw many people off their feet. The burning radiance of the explosions hadn't taken out the mech, but dealt severe damage beyond any regular missile on the market.

"Haha, you're mine now, little sis!" Vincent laughed hysterically as his customized mech stomped over a disabled mech. The Marc Antony dropped its shield and raised both arms in Catelyn's direction. The wrist-mounted laser cannons charged up for a full-powered salvo. "Any last words?"

Catelyn coughed as she rose from her knees. "I see you're more stupid than I thought, big brother. Do you think that just because you've been secretly training your piloting skills that you've got an edge on me? Imbecil!"

"Shut up! I'm tired of listening to your condescending insults. You should have died in the lab like the rest of your worthless batch!"

His mech fired of both cannons at once. Though their accuracy wasn't great, at this short distance they came close enough to vaporize any human by proximity alone. The lasers reached Catelyn's position at light speed. An area the size of an aircar parking lot instantly got scorched with an immense amount of thermal energy.

Scores of Ricklin elders who were too slow to run very far got turned into ash and smoke. Those who ran just a little faster got blasted with so much heat that their clothes turned into tar and ash while exposing their bodies with a lethal dose of heat. They fell down to the ground like melted candles. Only the younger generation managed to escape the blast zone with minimal wounds.

"Hahahaha! For all your snooty words, look at me now!"

As the blackened smoke cleared, the site where his laser cannons struck was a mass of heated devastation. Nothing other than a tank or a mech could have survived such a powerful blast. At least, that was what Vincent thought.

A strange bubble enveloped Catelyn's body. She stood proudly intact inside the shield, unbothered by the heat and ash. As scores of badly burned Ricklins moaned at the edges of the blast site, the young genetically modified girl appeared nonchalant at the carnage. Her expression even stared mockingly at Vincent.

"What is this shield? How come it's so powerful?"

"You're not the only one with powerful friends." The younger sister taunted.

"You're welcome to shoot me again. I dare say I can hold you off before my backup arrives."

As Vincent stared at his surviving sister in horror, a series of sirens started to erupt from the city proper. Explosions and other sounds of battle started to drum in the distance. All over Bentheim, unassuming mercenary groups started to board their mechs and attacked without reason.

According to the plan, Vincent should already be finished with his revenge and make his way towards a nearby escape shuttle. The timetable was tight, and Vincent couldn't afford to hammer away at Catelyn's strange shield if he wanted to escape from the Planetary Guard.

He gritted his teeth as he made a difficult decision. He could always enact his revenge later. His own life was more important. "Turin! Stop playing around and let's go!"

Even as their strike against Catelyn failed, they still managed to cull most of the other Ricklins. Their comrades-in-arms stationed elsewhere in Bentheim also succeeding in their surprise attacks. Bentheim's infrastructure suffered serious damage, and the death toll rapidly rose as the fires spread.

It was the prelude to war.

Chapter 70: Hasty Exit

Back in Cloudy Curtain, Ves woke up with tired eyes. Since yesterday, he prepared his departure with Dietrich. They booked a brief flight to one of Bentheim's orbital space station and wait for their long-distance passenger ship to arrive.

A call interrupted his final preparations. Ves picked up the comm and Marcella's worried face showed up.

"Ves, about your trip. Perhaps it's best to make yourself scarce for a month or two. There's trouble afoot."

This sounded serious. Something that disturbed the unflappable Marcella should not be a trivial matter.

"What happened?"

"It's about Vincent Ricklin. He's gone mad. He went on a rampage when he demonstrated your customized Marc Antony's prowess to his family."

Just hearing Vincent's name again made Ves wish he reconsidered doing business with him in the first place. Sure, the credits was nice, but if he did something serious enough for Marcella to call him in the morning, then it was bound to be bad.

"How bad is it, and how will it affect me?"

"He tried to fire his laser cannons on the presumptive heir of the Ricklins, a lass called Catelyn. Somehow, she survived, though how I don't know, but many other elders failed to get away from the blast area. Vincent bulled through the household guards and escaped from Bentheim with a well-prepared escape shuttle."

That sounded like a lot of trouble. Though Ves was uninvolved with this terrorist attack, he'd be in for a lot of scrutiny just by providing the mech to Vincent.

"Did the Mech Corps catch him?"

The frown in Marcella's face grew even more grim. "No. He had help that delayed the rapid response units. Pirates somehow smuggled themselves onto Bentheim and caused enough chaos to cover Vincent's escape. Nearby patrol ships all found themselves crippled by explosions when they attempted to chase their escape vessels. They've succeeded in pulling off the most blatant attack on Bentheim."

The news was incredibly bad for all those who had an inkling of involvement with the events.

"How's the casualties?"

"Excluding the Ricklins, over two hundred people have fallen in the ensuing chaos. The pirates weren't subtle in their actions. You know the damage a mech can do in a densely populated city."

It must be a nightmare back in Bentheim. Even the most casual laser fire might cut through a building and wipe out a dozen innocent bystanders. The injured must run up in the thousands.

"I can't stay behind." Ves said as he simultaneously felt conflicted. "As bad as I feel right now, I'm really innocent. You know the Marc Antony is a lastgen mech. It's hardly an elite mech in today's standards."

"That's why I support your impromptu vacation. Right now the public is in a frenzy and the Mech Corps has fallen flat in securing the star system. The investigators must be in a frenzy right now and it won't be long before they send someone your way."

"I think my family can stall them. The Larkinsons have always been loyal to the Republic and they have some say in military circles."

"Well, you best call on your daddy because this show is just starting."

He worriedly hung up on Marcella and with just a brief moment of hesitation he called his grandfather.

Perhaps anticipating his call, Benjamin Larkinson appeared on his screen. His unflappable face already radiated assurance to Ves. "I know what's going on, and I know you're not guilty of anything."

"Thanks, grandpa." Ves sighed as the reassurance comforted him. "I was planning on travelling to Leemar in order to take part in the open competition there. Could you help me smooth over my departure? This event is really important to me and my career and I can't afford to miss this opportunity due to being held back for questioning."

"I can guarantee that the investigators give you fair treatment, but any sudden departure will look suspicious. I can hold them back from chasing after you if you open up your records and let their people scour your workshop."

As Ves carried his real secrets in his comm, he had no problems letting others take a peek. Sanyal-Ablin pretty much saw everything there was to his workshop when they installed their security suite. Letting the government grab a good look was nothing to fuss about.

"They can do whatever they want as long as my workshop stays intact at the end. I still need to make a living, you know. I hope you can impress that on whoever is coming here to find something that doesn't exist."

"Oh you can be certain I won't let them get out of line." Benjamin grinned. "I've kept an eye on you and I can say that you've made us proud. The last thing I want to do is to let your hard work get ruined. So don't worry. I'll call in some

favours and try to suppress any suspicions on you. It's just that some suspicion will never go away."

His grandfather was right. Having his second ever produced mech be involved in a violent terrorist incident was going to be a black mark in his record. But Ves did not let it drag down his hopes. He still had a way to redeem himself if he worked hard.

"What do you think the investigators will do if I return a couple months later as an apprentice to a Master Mech Designer?"

The old man's eyes widened. Even a senior military official like him was nothing but an ant compared to a venerated master. "You will find that many obstacles will melt away like snow in a warm spring day. The prestige of a Master Mech Designer is not to be trifled with. Even a casual apprenticeship to such an eminent person will deter all gossip."

In the end, it came to power and backing. If Ves had studied at an elite institution from the Friday Coalition, he'd never had to worry about being detained for days.

"I'll hopefully return triumphant, grandpa."

"Go then. Spread your wings and see the worlds beyond the Republic. It's a tumultuous place in the center of the star sector. You will see many riches and wonders. Just remember that all of that wealth and power is built upon a foundation of strength."

After Benjamin terminated the call, Ves made some additional preparations. He sent a message to Robyn that SASS should let any official investigators enter his workshop without challenge. He then sent another message to the Little Boss with a summary of the situation and telling him to meet at the spaceport immediately.

"Well, guess I'm out of here. Let's go Lucky."

Man and gem cat turned to look at the workshop for the last time before entering the aircar. Ves browsed the news as his taxi zipped towards the spaceport. The footage the news broadcasters streamed to the rest of the Republic showed that Bentheim had descended into chaos.

Its openness as a port system worked against securing the planet. Too many mercenaries with shady affiliations entered the planet. Some of them turned out to be disguised pirates that somehow fooled Bentheim's stringent security checks.

Worse yet, in the hunt for pirates, the overzealous Planetary Guard sometimes struck mercenaries who were not involved in today's premeditated assault. The battles threatened to spill out and cause even further casualties.

What hurt Ves the most was the occasional footage of what sparked this ambush. The highly modified Marc Antony with its codpiece and all raised its laser cannons and shot straight at a group of defenseless bystanders. The news stations immortalized the brief recording with how hard they tried to send it out to the rest of the star sector.

"Damn it. Forget about the codpiece, Vincent's mere involvement will be an unerasable black mark in my record."

As he hastily suggested to his grandfather, his only way to redeem himself was to achieve his goals in Leemar. Only by attaining some kind of formidable backing would he be able to endure the scrutiny.

The commentators and pundits already speculated on the influence that attacked the Republic. Nobody really believed a bunch of noname pirates planned, funded, manned and executed the intricate raid all by themselves. A lot of Republicans pointed the finger at the Monarchists of the Vesia Kingdom despite the lack of any convincing evidence that hinted at their hand.

Even Ves found this theory compelling. As a homebred citizen of the Bright Republic, he was raised to regard the Vesia Kingdom as their archrivals. Only the Vesians had sufficient motives to find trouble with the Republic.

"Hey, Ves. It's a bad day today." Dietrich finally greeted him once he arrived by the spaceport. The Little Boss looked quite subdued at the moment as he worried for the wellbeing of Walter's Whalers. "I feel kind of bad leaving my mates behind."

"We're only gone for two months or so. A war won't erupt this soon."

Actually, Ves had no idea what was going on behind the scenes. He just said that to reassure his bodyguard. The two subdued young men eagerly boarded a large passenger transport to Bentheim with their floating luggage bots. Besides that, Ves brought an ever-curious Lucky along while Dietrich already stowed away his mech in a container aboard their ship.

The passenger ship was only half-filled this time, an oddity attributed to the attack. Some sought safety in Bentheim's large numbers, but most locals felt it was best to stay on their quiet, unimportant planet and avoid the giant target Bentheim represented. After all, the Vesians never hid their desire to engulf the port system.

The trip to Bentheim was brief and uneventful, save for the additional security measures. The transport had to stop in space and allow inspectors to scan each passenger and piece of cargo in person. One of the inspectors paused briefly when he scanned Ves, but whatever instructions he received forced him to move on.

The people who went over Dietrich's mech added extra seals to his machine. This didn't stop him from using his mech in an emergency, but it took an experienced mech technician at least half an hour to make it battle-ready.

As they arrived at the Bentheim spaceport, they encountered a deluge of humanity. Scores of soldiers kept the peace as they tried to corral the emigrating people in a semblance of order. Ves could only rely on Dietrich's strength to squeeze through the mobs.

"This is insane!" Ves yelled at Dietrich as they waited behind a line. His words could barely be heard over the panicked din of conversation. "There's so many people seeking safer refuge!"

"It's better if these cowards get out. They're nothing but useless sacks of meat."

Eventually, they made use of their priority boarding access and entered a much more orderly area. Only the affluent could afford business-class tickets that allowed them passage on a premium spaceline. Both Ves and Dietrich looked out the window to behold the giant monstrosity that carried them out of the Republic.

TORCH OF THE VANGUARD

Townsend's Spacelines

The patriotic name referred to some kind of event or myth that happened early in the Bright Republic's history. While the Republic subsidized the construction of the ship, the operating owners of the entire line resided in the Coalition.

Marcella highly recommended this line to Ves. The enormous passenger ship plied the spaceways from the Republic to all of the other third-rate states in between until she finally reached the edge of Coalition space. Then she travelled the same way back, escorted by a small contingent of space-capable mechs.

Naturally, all of this safety, luxury and speed came at a cost. Ves and Dietrich parted with a whopping hundred-and-fifty thousand bright credits each, and

that was just for business class. The passenger ship offered even more extravagant tiers that came with private swimming pools and state-of-the-art sparring arenas.

"Here's to a new adventure." Ves whispered to himself as he held Lucky tight and followed the excited Dietrich aboard the magnificent vessel.