

Chapter 101: Executioner

A sharp and menacing mech gained shape. The Executioner and its two copies emanated subtle halo promising the harvesting of lives. As the person standing closest to his newly designed mechs, he even had the impression that the Executioners amplified each other's presences. Due to this mutual enhancement, Ves gained a new cognition to what he thought was the X-Factor.

"Is this the true expression of the X-Factor?" Ves wondered silently. He did not dare utter his words loudly. He suspected he inadvertently lifted up a veil to one of the secrets of the X-Factor. "If I haven't been watching out for it, I would have brushed this feeling off as being overwhelmed by emotions."

The uncertainty still gnawed at him. Without having any opportunity to open the System and read its evaluation, he had no way of determining how far he had progressed. Ves had grown used to the System's reliable and precise feedback.

"What will happen if I fabricate an entire squad of identical mechs? How strong will their united presence become?"

Such a unit brought with them an unprecedented amount of unity. Ves had no idea how banding together affected the minds of the pilots, but he suspected that their level of cooperation reached new heights.

He had to experiment with this later. Right now, Ves had a couple of mechs to deliver. With just a few minutes before the generous ten hour time limit expired, he made a final check before letting the mechs go. His role in the third round was over. Now he passed the baton to his pilot.

After finishing his mechs, he entered the much emptier waiting room where he sought a familiar face. Patricia stood at the side, listening to the commentary gushing about the new mechs.

"How's your design? Are you confident?"

Her eye swiveled at him as if he was asking if the galaxy was large. "Out of fifty-thousand mech designers, only twenty-four of us had made it to the final round. Do you think any of us has any reason to lack any confidence?"

"You make a good point." Ves said belatedly. "I'm surprised to see you in the finals. I've gone to the same school as you and I've never seen you study something that could propel your skills to this level."

"I could say the same for you. There's hardly anything in your background that suggests you are capable of matching the graduates from the Leemar Institute of Technology. This place is one of the holy grails of mech design in this Star Sector. It truly baffles everyone who witnesses your rise."

The two reached an unspoken agreement not to pry more into the reasons of their sudden improvements. Ves had no doubt Patricia hid some secrets. Perhaps none so drastic as a System, but still something that could not be spoken aloud.

"Ah, I see the plebs have gathered together to talk about how much they enjoy rolling in the mud." An incisive voice cut from the side.

Ves recognized the approaching man. "How nice of you to meet us Mister Kurbanov. I was just about to tell my friend how your mech will collapse at the first blow."

"A fine boast. A pity you can never back it up." Lachlan huffed contemptuously at him. "I don't know why the LIT allows third-rate rabble like you to participate in the competition. Designers like you still treat lastgen mechs as modern designs!"

"It is a mistake to consider us backward just because we don't have as much access to resources as the Friday Coalition. You might find we are not any worse in terms of spirit and drive."

Before Lachlan spat out a retort, Barakovski approached him from behind and put a hand on his shoulder. "There's no need to disgrace yourself, Lachlan. Let your mech prove your strength."

"You're right as always, dear Cynthia." Lachlan huffed and turned around. "My Brandmark will easily pound his toy into scrap."

Barakovski shrugged apologetically at Ves before guiding Lachlan to the other side of the waiting room. While Ves did not need any rescuing, he appreciated her concern.

"Is there anything going on between you and Barakovski?"

"Nah, nothing at all. We only grouped up together in the third round of the qualifiers."

"I see."

Once the commentators stopped slobbering over the mechs, the duels commenced. Twelve simultaneous one-on-one duels began in the prepared arenas.

The match between his Executioner and Lachlan's Brandmark took place in a randomized marsh environment. Shallow pools of stale water surrounded modestly-sized mudhills.

Mechs that had to traverse over this complex terrain had to worry about unstable footing. Faster mechs were at a disadvantage due to the limits placed on their top speed.

In contrast, the abundance of water gave heat-dependent mechs an ideal environment. Water was a great conductor of heat. Mechs that relied on energy intensive weapons such as laser cannons could fire off their weapons in rapid succession without worrying about melting off their barrels.

It just so happened that Lachlan's mech utilized a lot of lasers. Perhaps aware of Cadet Lovejoy's penchant for swords, Lachlan designed a mech based around ranged superiority. His efforts resulted in a fairly robust medium mech adorned with lots of firepower.

"That's quite a top-heavy cannoneer." Ves commented as he rubbed his eyes. He did not expect such a model to come from Lachlan's hands. "Replacing the arms with cannons is a very risky choice."

Patricia hummed with interest as she analyzed the design. "His mech obviously isn't meant to resist an opponent with a melee weapon. It makes sense to save weight and optimize systems in favor of a fully dedicated ranged build. That's how frontline models are designed. I can tell Lachlan is preparing for a career in the Mech Corps."

Lachlan's cannoneer mech had done away with humanoid arms. Instead, he replaced them with two large and heavy laser cannons. The straight and ominous-looking barrels were able to rotate and aim at a wide range of angles.

If that wasn't enough, his Brandmark also sported two smaller laser barrels on its shoulders. Their slim and lightweight design allows them to track moving targets with greater ease than the large and sluggish cannons.

As the Brandmark sported four incredibly hungry laser weapons, the machine also carried a couple of attachments meant to mitigate their scary energy consumption. The mech wore a strange backpack module that Lachlan must have built from scratch.

Ves guessed that it contained a combination of energy cells and heat sinks in order to extend the Brandmark's endurance. The wet, marshy environment only provided the cannoneer with another advantage. The pilot, Lisa Kwong,

already started to grin as she familiarized herself with the mech and the abundant water in the vicinity.

As for Lovejoy, he spent some time on his own with his new mech. Ves designed the Executioner as an explicitly different machine from his Sword Dancer. Lovejoy had to memorize his new mech's characteristics and formulate a new game plan that took advantage of its strengths.

"Now this is more like it. I've always found the Sword Dancer to be too dainty for my tastes." Lovejoy remarked as he practiced a couple of mighty heaves with the Executioner's hefty sword. "It's a bit on the slow side, but I can manage."

What the Executioner lost in agility, it more than made up for it with power. A lesser pilot might consider the extra weight to be baggage. A proper swordsman had ways to take advantage of these properties.

After finishing his brief practice, Lovejoy gained enough confidence to set out. His Executioner slowly trudged through the muddy terrain. The feet of his mech sunk into the dirty soil like a fatty jumping into a swimming pool. The mud splashed everywhere and the metal dug in deep. Every time the mech raised its foot, a sucking sound emerged as if the mud did not wish to part with a lover.

"This is disgusting." Lovejoy spat as his mech awkwardly navigated the swampy terrain. "Hopefully I don't have to crawl everywhere in order to find my opponent."

Anyone who reached the top 24 was a force to be reckoned with. He briefly studied the bracket along with the other pilots and knew he faced Lisa Kwong right now. As a top pilot, Cadet Kwong made her name as a marksman. Whether in or out of the cockpit, her ability to shoot on target impressed

everyone at the academy. She even went on to represent the school in various competitions.

"I'm not going to be able to dodge my way out of this match if I still piloted the Sword Dancer. This Executioner's extra armor is a lot more useful against an expert marksman like Kwong."

His strategy was simple. Once he spotted Kwong's mech, he'd simply redirect as much power to his flight systems as possible and close the range without bothering with any fanciful dodging patterns. He had to finish this battle as fast as possible in order to prevent Kwong from exploiting her long-range skills.

His sensors pinged at discovering a contact. Kwong's mech had found a deep pool which allowed her cannoneer to submerge up to its knees. The generous contact with the surrounding water aided the mech in transferring any built-up heat.

The Brandmark detected the Executioner a little bit earlier. As a mech built for medium and long-ranged combat, its sensors and targeting systems received a lot of attention. Lachlan personally adjusted the targeting system's programming in order to take full advantage of all of its hardware improvements.

The first shots landed on the Executioner with the speed of light. Both of the laser cannons zeroed in on the Executioner with hardly any need for calibration or test firing. The twin impacts struck the medium mech with a gigantic flash of heat and light. Its chest already bore the melted scars from the impact. If the armor hadn't been compressed, the blasts would have certainly turned the armor plates into slag.

The second salvo came merely two seconds later. Such a rate of fire was highly dangerous, but Kwong had no qualms in pushing a mech to its limits, especially if it was only meant to last a single match.

Thus, for various reasons, both pilots sought a quick end to the match. Cadet Lovejoy obliged by making his mech lift off from the forbidding swamp and rocket straight towards the Brandmark.

"You're dead meat Lovejoy!" Kwong's voice boomed from her speakers as her mech landed another accurate salvo. "This is my ideal environment! Just admit that you've lost!"

"I'll chop up your mech before you empty your energy cells!"

The Executioner's flight system worked as hard as its limited size could sustain. The mech was rather heavy, and it could only do so much. Lovejoy found he had to endure a lot more hits than he first imagined.

Even the Brandmark's smaller shoulder mounted lasers fired at him in unison. The simulated temperature in Lovejoy's pod started to heat up.

In the meantime, the Brandmark turned its legs around a hundred-and-eighty degrees and ran backwards, all the while continuing to lay down accurate fire. Cannoneers often sported such modifications, though only at later generations. Lachlan must have spent a lot of time on it in order to make sure his mech remained accurate.

Two pairs of laser beams intermittently impacted his mech with a disturbing amount of accuracy. No matter how Lovejoy juke his mech, the best he could accomplish was to spread out the impact areas so they wouldn't burn through a concentrated area. It worked for now, but his frontal armor still had limits, compressed or not.

The Executioner crossed its arms and tried to shield its vulnerable chest from further damage. As the armor on the arms were thinner, it only lasted a dozen seconds before Lovejoy had to give that up. He still needed the arms to wield the sword.

"There's too much distance. I can't last long enough to get close." Lovejoy determined with a struggling expression. "Too many lasers. Too much distance. Kwong's not even letting up."

The water around the fleeing Brandmark started to boil as the cannoneer tried to shunt as much heat as possible. The surface of the Brandmark was hot enough to fry an egg, but somehow the overheating mech never grew hot to the point its systems started failing. It could barely handle the amount of heat it currently generated, but that was more than enough to shoot down the Executioner.

Frustration welled up in Lovejoy's heart. "Is my path to the finals going to end this quickly?"

Chapter 102: Cutting Edge

A mech dedicated to destroying its opponents at range often accomplished their kills if they were willing to pay the price. Lisa Kwong flipped off all the safeties in order to let the Brandmark fire off as much lasers as possible. Beams of varying intensity flew through the air in rapid succession.

As an engine of destruction, the Brandmark revealed no flaws. Its firepower approached the magnitude of a heavy mech, and its heat dispersal was excellent even without the surrounding water. Such a well-built mech had no possibility of breaking down as long as Kwong did not push her mech any further.

Cadet Lovejoy tried to figure out a solution. His Executioner could not weather this laser storm for long. "I'm still only halfway but my mech is already approaching the limit! There's nothing in sight that I can use as cover!"

The marshy terrain was devoid of any distinguishing features to block the lasers. There were no hills, no trees and hardly any bushes. Considering the power behind the laser cannons, only the sturdiest trees had a chance of dispersing the larger beams.

Lacking any other means, Lovejoy could only resort to sacrificing his parts of his mech. He first boosted the power of his flight system before raising the legs of his mech. The lasers burned right through the soles of his mech in short order. Even as the successive beams cooked the legs into slag, it succeeded in shielding the critical parts of the mech.

Those who paid attention to this battle showed a lot of appreciation for this drastic move. To keep a mech in flight in this posture required a lot of control in order to maintain this delicate balance. If the Executioner got hit by any kinetic projectile, it would immediately lose its balance and fall.

Fortunately for Lovejoy, the Brandmark sported a dedicated laser loadout. While its laser beams looked intimidating, it essentially consisted of pure electromagnetic radiation. It was like using a flashlight to open a door. The door might melt if the beam was concentrated enough, but it required a stupendous amount of power to open the door through pure kinetic force.

Lovejoy took advantage of this basic fact by recklessly flying forward in a highly unstable posture. Even as the feet fell apart, the Executioner still possessed a substantial amount of leg armor.

"It sure is serendipitous for me to face a laser mech with a flight-capable machine. I'd be stuck in a dead end if I only had a pistol."

The uncertainty of what a mech pilot might encounter in his next sortie often broke their minds. Many potentates ultimately washed out of the mech pilot academies due to a lack of adaptability. A qualified pilot was ready for combat anywhere and anytime against any opponent imaginable. Even against a ludicrous mech such as the Pterodactyl, Lovejoy still insisted up to the very end.

Raising the legs mid-flight was an inspired solution that came at a cost. With the slow disintegration of the legs, Lovejoy had to push his piloting skills to the

limit in order to maintain his balance. A flying mech could not easily maintain its balance without the ballast provided by the legs. If handled badly, the Executioner might end up spinning around like a top.

"This is ridiculous!" Kwong exclaimed as she kept pumping out laser after laser. "Why won't you fall already?!"

"Blame your designer for focusing too much on lasers!"

The gap closed within moments. At the very last second, Lovejoy spun around his mech and stretched out its sword with both hands.

The Brandmark attempted to dodge to the side, but Lovejoy had already watched out for that adjusted his sword grip. The broad and deadly tip sunk right through the right side of the Brandmark's torso. Its well-treated armor buckled instantly against the momentum of a flying mech going forth at full speed.

Like a melted knife through butter, the sword impaled the Brandmark with ease and severed many essential components. The rest of the Executioner frame collided against the Brandmark, causing both mechs to sustain heavy impact damage. Nevertheless, a lot of the force had been channeled into the sword, causing its tip to emerge from the back of the Brandmark.

"..CUT!" Lovejoy yelled as his damaged mech tried to leverage as much force as possible while still in midair.

The Executioner's flight system had performed miracles so far by keeping the mech aloft. When Lovejoy cut off all of its power, the remnants of the mech started to fall while maintaining a tight grip on its sword.

The edge of the sword ruthlessly sliced down the helpless Brandmark like a butcher's knife. The massive sword spliced open its lower torso, cutting straight through the cockpit and engines.

The crowd cheered at the brief but intense clash. The commentators briefly showered Lovejoy with praise for his expert piloting before turning back to the other duels.

Ves let out a deep breath. He won his first duel. Though the terrain heavily favored his opponent's mech, Lovejoy somehow managed to overturn the odds. If not for his flight system and if not for the Brandmark's complete reliance on lasers, this match might have ended differently.

"This.. this isn't possible! There's so much water! How could my Brandmark fail to shoot down that primitive mech?!"

And so fell another darling from Leemar. Lachlan Kurbanov's journey to the top had ended abruptly. The two other copies of the Brandmark were destined to be recycled.

His loss of composure disgraced his school. Many spectators who stood close to the waiting room pointed out his delirious descent into disbelief. Those who also studied at Leemar simply shook their heads. Though they favored the alumni from their school, it was his fault for being too weak.

"Sometimes, I wonder whether the single duel format is flawed." Ves remarked to Patricia as he turned away from Lachlan's display. "It's a complete roll of the dice whether the terrain favors your mech, or whether it is facing its natural counter."

Patricia smiled as she kept her eyes glued to her heavy mech. Many of the duels were still starting out.

The instance where Lovejoy and Kwong tried to force a quick resolution did not happen elsewhere. The pilots played conservatively whenever they could get away with it. They only started to take risks when their opponents backed them into a corner.

"The duels are never meant to be fair. They are meant to be decisive."

Patricia finally pointed out. "The pilot only has to worry about how to use the tools at hand. Tools which you have generously provided them. After all, what are we here for if not designing mechs?"

A mech designer did not fight the enemy on the battlefield. Instead, they worked behind the scenes. They were not omniscient and could not predict the future. All they could do is gather as much information as possible and prepare their designs according to the parameters set by their clients.

The first set of duels ended after a few moments of time. Most of the mechs faced their equals in terms of design and piloting skill. Every pilot wanted to attain glory, so even the losers fought as if their lives were on the line.

Only twelve designs remained. Surprisingly, Patricia's heavy mech also eked out a victory. Together with Ves, they were all that was left of the so-called walkers. Like Barakovski, the rest of the survivors came from privileged backgrounds.

"This is interesting! Both of our exotic guests are from the Bright Republic!"

The female commentator noted with bright eyes. "They even shared the same classes in the same school! Might there be something special brewing between the two? Is that the secret to their success?"

Both Ves and Patricia turned away in embarrassment. They were just acquaintances. Before encountering her at Leemar, he could not even claim to be her friend.

After that brief moment of levity, the second duels commenced. According to the bracket, Ves had to face a familiar name. One he did not wish to face at all due to their shared experiences.

"Looks like fate wants to determine who is better." Barakovski said with a grin.

"I'm looking forward to our duel."

"Your Cineron might be quick, but my Executioner is not a slowpoke."

"We'll see."

Unlike some of the other designers, Barakovski stuck to a single design whenever she could get away with it. She highly favored light mechs and always tried to design a skirmisher or a harasser. With ten hours of time, she refined her final iteration to an insane degree. Ves had a lot of respect for Barakovski, so even he refused to guess whether his mech could prevail.

When the Cineron emerged onto the generic urban battlefield, it instantly started to gallop away. The light mech sported a decent amount of speed but carried a luxurious weapon loadout. First of all, its arms sported a pair of wrist-mounted laser cannons, scaled to light mechs. Instead of carrying shoulder mounts, the Cineron instead wielded a pair of heated knives.

"Why did you forgo the shoulder mounts?"

Barakovski nonchalantly shrugged. "My mech makes for a great ambusher with a pair of knives. Why would I ruin my mech's balance with a pair of shoulder mounts? I might as well hang some rocks on its frame."

Her words suggested that the Cineron was capable of moving faster. His Executioner might be capable of flight, but the flight system could not propel the swordsman mech as fast as a dedicated sprinter mech.

The Executioner carefully navigated the deserted downtown streets. Abandoned air cars and fallen structures made it difficult for Lovejoy to find his opponent quickly. Luckily, despite the clutter, the terrain heavily favored mechs like the Executioner. With an abundant amount of cover, he could hop from pile to pile if he had to face the Brandmark again. He'd never have to sacrifice parts of his mech again.

As both mechs weren't hiding, they eventually found each other after a few minutes of combing the area. After realizing that the Executioner only relied

on its sword, the Cineron engaged aggressively, firing its laser cannons from a medium range.

"I'm not a sitting duck!" Lovejoy yelled as he pumped full power into his mech's flight system.

The Cineron was caught off-guard, but quickly adjusted by sprinting away. After building up its speed, the mech easily maintained its distance to the furiously pursuing Executioner. The pilot deftly navigated past the obstacles in its way, all the while maintaining its harassing fire.

Lovejoy gritted his teeth at being bombarded with lasers again. "Is that all? Compared to what I endured in my previous duel, your shots are barely scraping my paint!"

A light mech had no way of matching the firepower of a medium mech. While the wrist mounts maintained a steady rate of fire, its accuracy was not as good. Barakovski made too many compromises when she went for wrist-mounted lasers. They excelled at carving up a mech over time.

The Executioner did not intend to become the Cineron's punching bag. The mech strained its flight system past its conservative settings. The heavier mech started to catch up to the light mech.

Still, unlike the Brandmark, the Cineron had a surprise in store. A module opened up from its back and released a fine mist of particles in the air.

Ves rose up from his seat. "Particle ejector!"

His iconic Seraphim variant utilized this specific form of active ECM, so he was no stranger to its effects. The Executioner lost its sight of the Cineron. After a few seconds of flight, it exited the cloud of sensor-blocking cloud.

"Where are you?" Lovejoy wondered as he shut down his flight system before it melted down. As his mech started to cool down from the exertion, he kept a close eye on his sensor readings and his surroundings.

After finding no trace of the Cineron, he concluded the mech still hid inside the cloud. The Cineron purely used the particle cloud as an escape mechanism.

"If you think blinding me will help, then think again."

His Executioner resolutely entered the cloud. The particles had already spread out to the entire street, which meant that it was difficult to bump into the Cineron. Nevertheless, Lovejoy closed his eyes and tried to sense the whereabouts of his opponent with his other sensors.

After a few seconds went by, the swordsman mech suddenly raised its sword and struck to the left. The blade struck nothing but empty air.

In the meantime, a pair of laser beams just skimmed off its head. The Cineron deliberately aimed at the sensors.

This game of cat and mouse continued for over two minutes. The Cineron was equally as blind as the Executioner, so it was only able to fire at its target accurately if it came close. This gave Lovejoy a chance to turn the tables. A few times, his sword even scratched the surface of the light mech's paperthin armor.

"This cloud won't last forever!" Lovejoy remarked. He wanted to urge his opponent on. "I'm faster than you. The longer you lurk around, the more my flight system cools off. Can you afford to wait all day?"

The Cineron came from behind. Just as the Executioner swirled around to cut the mech in half, the Cineron's wrists sparked with lightning.

"Shit!"

A massive bolt of lightning landed on the Executioner, causing it to halt in its steps. The Cineron also paid a price for the attack, but it recovered a lot quicker. The Cineron expertly retrieved its pair of heated knives and dove towards the paralyzed mech, ready to gut it like a pig.

Seeing his doom approaching, Lovejoy frantically tried to budge his mech.
"MOVE ALREADY! CUT!"

Just as the first knife slipped inside the chest, the Executioner burst into life. While the mech lost power to a lot of its systems, they were quite robust. Ves always put a lot of importance in his mech's integrity. His diligence paid off as the Executioner regained its strength just as the Cineron was about to deliver its fatal blows.

"CUT!"

The sword swung once.

Barakovski closed her eyes.

Chapter 103: Only Six

"Congratulations for your victory, Ves. You deserve it." Barakovski finally said as she silently regained her composure. "What a resilient mech. Your Executioner really awes the crowd."

Everyone who attended the duel applauded his work. The Executioner shrugged off the effects of the lightning bolt in record time. It was doubtful whether mechs designed by others could do the same. Only the most remarkable designers like Carter Gauge could reach this level.

While Ves lacked the overflowing talent of someone of Gauge's caliber, he finally proved his own worth. Nobody badmouthed him anymore in his presence. The other designers, all of whom enjoyed billions of cols worth of investment, regarded him as if he was a hidden tiger.

Since Barakovski lost, a pair of attendants guided her off the stage. She'd return to the podium at the end, but for now the spotlight only shone on the winners. After waving her goodbye, he walked over to Patricia and looked down on the arena where her mech put up a fierce fight.

When he looked at Patricia's dauntless heavy mech launching missile after missile, he couldn't help but feel sorry for the enemy hybrid knight. Its fragile kinetic shoulder mounts had already been obliterated under a rain of high explosive missiles. Right now, it barely hung on to its tattered shield as salvo after salvo of kinetic missiles struck its surface.

"That's a very interesting direction you've chosen. Aren't you afraid your mech becomes harmless once it expends all of its missiles?"

"Just as your design commits to a sword, I'm confident I my mech can sweep away any opponent with its missiles alone. At a certain point you just have to put your trust in your ability."

Ves nodded at her words. A mech designed solely around a single weapon system did not have to make unpalatable compromises. For example, the hybrid knight that was currently taking a pounding tried to combine ranged and melee capabilities in a single package. It wasted a lot of capacity that could have been used to strengthen its armor or its speed.

Flexibility had its uses, but strength overcame all.

Predictably, the hybrid knight succumbed once its shield fell apart. Its armor lasted quite a bit, but Patricia's heavy mech still carried plenty of reserves. It ultimately finished off the knight with about twenty percent left.

Ves had to admit that Patricia chose a bold design. Her mech only used a single strategy: vomit out as much missiles as possible before the enemy closed in. Most of the other mechs designed by the finalists completely disregarded artillery mechs due to their scarcity in one-on-one duels.

A regular artillery mech might pose little threat in a duel environment, but one designed by Patricia was different. She obviously tweaked the missile payloads, causing the high explosive missiles to be twice as powerful and the kinetic missiles delivering three times the force.

Patricia only paid for it by reducing their maximum range, which was not that big of a deal in the small arena. The missiles also lost much of their maneuverability and tracking capabilities. The pilot had to target his missiles carefully in order to ensure they'd hit the target. Faster mechs stood a better chance of prevailing against the missile barrage.

After the end of the second duels, only six designers remained. Ves looked at those who survived thus far. Besides Patricia, he recognized none of the other four, but they all represented the best of what the Friday Coalition had to offer.

It was no coincidence that the top three graduates from the Leemar Institute of Technology had made it this far. They were all eminent geniuses who could almost be placed on par with some of the lower-class graduates from an average first-rate institution. Any casual graduate from a first-rate institution could raise a storm in the industry of a second-rate state, so that was high praise.

"There's still a distance between me and Edwin McKinney." Ves sighed ruefully as he remembered how utterly dominant the genius displayed his skill.

Edwin had truly leaped the dragon gate and shrugged off the shackles of his humble origin, if it was ever humble in the first place.

Before the start of the third and final duel, Professor Marshall took to the stage once more. Her eyes swept the gazes of each of the surviving designers with pride. "The six of you can be proud. No matter who wins or loses, you have all reached the pinnacle of mech design at your age group."

She raised a hand, causing a projection to emerge. "Nevertheless, our Open Competition only allows for three finalists. I have spoken with the masters and they have all affirmed that the winners will be guaranteed an offer of apprenticeship."

The news struck the crowd like a bombshell. Such a statement meant that all of the six possessed enough qualifications to study under a renowned master.

"Outside of that, you must look at your luck."

This meant that the losers of this final round might not be chosen, even if they possessed the right qualifications. No one knew why the masters made this decision. Perhaps they simply didn't want to pick up a designer who lost to someone else's apprentice.

"Same as last time, the final three winners will receive a special prize. Behold our latest innovation!"

The projection finally resolved into a model of a small inter-system spaceship. A couple of specs overlaid the most important parts of the hundred-meter long vessel. The impressive specs quickly roused the interests of those in the shipcraft industry.

"Our institute has developed a new spaceship ideal for personal travel. The Arkon Mark I is the most advanced ship in the series. She features the latest advancements in FTL precision, so she is able to jump across vast stretches of space. Despite her compact size, her cargo bay can hold up to four standard-sized containers or two packaged mechs."

In practice, this meant that the ship could only keep one mech on standby. The Arkon had evidently been designed around this feature. Many smaller ships and yachts lacked the space to keep a mech on standby.

Ves knew a little about ships. A ship like the Arkon incorporated enough exotics to build a dozen mechs. The price of this ship could definitely bankrupt most billionaires back in the Bright Republic.

"Even if I don't have a use for this ship, I can sell her for a fortune."

Just imagining the rain of credits he could obtain turned his eyes red with hunger. Losing was not an option. He had to make it to the final three.

The Arkon Mark I possessed both speed, armor, range and comfort. The only downside was that her FTL and regular engines both ran on high-grade fuel. This fuel was extremely powerful, but also expensive. Governments kept a tight group on the supply of such fuels.

Those who wished to use the top-of-the-line model as a courier or a cargo transport shook their heads. Even in a wealthy state like the Friday Coalition, the operating costs was hard to bear, especially in a low-margin business like interstellar cargo transport.

Even Ves had to bleed a lot of credits if he wanted to take the ship out for a spin. Considering his future trajectory, obtaining a fast and well-armored ship was no misdemeanor, especially if he could get it for free.

After finishing her speech, Professor Marshall receded and made way for the final battles.

According to the bracket, Ves faced an elite who originated from another institution under the Carnegie Group. Felix Tremor clawed his way through numerous rivals, including many geniuses from Leemar.

His mech, the Handshake, excelled in sniping, but could put up a mean fight in close range as well. His pilot, Xandra Ribeiro, was an all-rounder who could play his mechs to its strengths.

Lovejoy waited patiently in the simulated cockpit of his now-familiar Executioner. After undergoing two brief but intense struggles, he had developed an intimacy with this model. Even after wrecking two identical mechs, the third still welcomed his presence like a warhorse reuniting with its knight.

While the rewards for mech pilots were not as generous as those received by mech designers, they still received a fair amount of wealth and prestige. If Lovejoy won the next battle, he could leave his mark in history and be celebrated for many years on end. His employment prospects would definitely soar to an unimaginable height.

After a moment of adjustment, the final battlefield unfolded into a lifeless moon environment. The low gravity caused his mech to bounce up with each step. Fortunately, it also reduced the load to the flight system, causing the mech to fly around effortlessly.

Still, Lovejoy did not dare divert too much power. In this near-vacuum environment, mechs suffered a reduction in their ability to disperse heat.

Overall, the terrain highly favored the Executioner. If his opponent's mech turned out to be a laser rifleman, he'd have a really hard time.

"Where is he?" Lovejoy wondered as he scoured the silent landscape. "This guy sure is patient."

He scoured half the battlefield, only to come up with nothing. Just as he considered changing his search pattern, his instincts screamed at him. He flared up his flight system, but his response came too late.

A high-powered kinetic projectile tore into the leg of the Executioner. Large chunks of armor sprayed into the distance as the slug hammered the affected area. The leg instantly lost all functionality.

"Xandra!" Lovejoy yelled as he honed in on her position. Disregarding the damage, he urged his mech onwards.

"Sorry Reddy, but I'll be taking the finals!" The woman responded as she fired another slug from the Handshake's railgun. Her weapon generated a fair amount of heat, but not as much as a laser.

The second slug penetrated glanced off Executioner as it kept dodging sideways. A huge furrow emerged from its side armor, exposing the internals to vacuum.

The Handshake calmly continued to fire off slugs. Its heavy railgun packed a very huge punch, but it required quite a bit of time to charge up the capacitors. By the time the Executioner came close, Xandra only managed to unleash half-a-dozen slugs.

All of the slugs made their mark on the swordsman mech. Despite his best efforts, his dodging only succeeded in preventing a fatal hit. Two slugs impacted the chest, causing the Executioner's power reactor to sputter. If not for the generous amount of armor, the second slug could have killed the mech.

Once Lovejoy's mech closed the distance, Xandra decisively threw away the railgun and retrieved a spear. Her medium mech stood ready to receive his charge.

Their weapons clashed. The Handshake successfully fended off the Executioner's charge. Its prepared stance absorbed a fair portion of the force behind the collision.

As for the Executioner, the failed strike caused it to fly to the side. Lovejoy fought to stabilize his mech. The crippled leg and reduced gravity made it twice as hard for him to regain his mech's balance.

"Having reactor trouble?" Xandra taunted as she noticed the Executioner's fluctuating power output. "Your mech might shut down at any moment!"

The intermittent power output was a sign of further trouble. Lovejoy quickly read the damage report and knew his mech was on a time limit. The railgun practically ripped through half the Executioner's chest. Only its well-designed internals and abundant redundancies allowed the mech to maintain a modicum of functionality.

Even if his mech remained floating on borrowed time, Lovejoy didn't show it. "Even if my mech is half as good as yours, I can still tidy you up. Don't forget who tutored you in swordplay!"

"That happened ages ago! I've grown enormously since then!"

While Lovejoy only briefly branched out before fully immersing himself in swords, Xandra sought to master everything under the sun. She attained a comprehensive proficiency in every category imaginable to a further degree than anyone else in the academy. In truth, her spearplay was not much worse than Lovejoy's swordplay.

Yet this tiny gap might as well be as wide as a canyon. As Lovejoy corralled his unstable mech and decisively engaged his opponent, his heavy sword strikes pushed Xandra's mech backwards. He heavily relied on his flight system to push his mech forward and put some weight into his attacks.

If not for the sparking power reactor, he could have pushed the Xandra to her limits. Now though, Lovejoy had to keep his distance in case his mech lost control. Xandra even regained the initiative once she noticed his hesitation. She aggressively increased the tempo of the clashes.

Chapter 104: Fire In Your Veins

The duel between the Executioner and the Handshake stretched out over a hundred exchanges. While the swordsman mech put a lot of power in its

attacks, the spear-wielding medium mech always blocked or deflected the predictable attacks with ease.

Sweat trickled from Lovejoy's brow as he desperately tried to figure out a path to victory. His damaged power reactor started to release more smoke as he kept stressing the Executioner. For a mech designed in just ten hours, its relative stability impressed the audience.

"The armor isn't the best I've seen, but its integrity is top-notch for a designer this young."

"Who is the designer? Larkinson? Doesn't ring a bell."

"Bright Republic? What kind of backwater could nurture not one, but two designers who made it to the finals?"

No one had a clue why both Ves and Patricia came out of the blue and beat countless geniuses nurtured by the most prestigious second-rate institutions. Was there something in the water over at the Bright Republic? Were they secretly cultivating a group of half-alien hybrids? No one knew, but the pair's performances already exceeded their capacity of thought.

Still, in the duel between Ves and Felix most of the crowd favored the latter. Not only did he enjoy a better background, his mech was a marvellous machine.

Even Ves wanted to dig into Felix's head in order to find out how he made the Handshake specialize in both railguns and spears. Hybrid mechs usually favored one weapon or the other. Though it was subtle, Ves recognized that the Handshake could break several records with both its marksmanship and spearplay.

"None of the final six are weak." Ves concluded with a smile.

If his mech lost to Felix's work, then he had nothing to complain. The only downside was that he could not afford to fall short when he almost reached the finish line.

Too much was at stake. He already offended plenty of personages. Just thinking about how Gauge's pilot mysteriously ended up committing suicide was enough to make Ves sleep uneasily. Only by winning this final duel and apprenticing himself to a master could he avoid the calamities he continually provoked.

Thus, he kept rooting for Lovejoy even as the audience peeled off to watch the other duels. The match seemed to lost all suspense.

As the designer, Ves knew how much the Executioner could take. The swordsman mech was tougher than it looked. As long as his pilot refused to give up, he still had a shot of winning.

The Executioner slipped up when its power output stuttered for a fraction of a second. Though Lovejoy recovered quickly, Xandra still managed to slip in a spear thrust. The tip of the spear bore a hole through an arm, causing it to be unable to bear the weight of the sword.

Lovejoy's mech already accumulated a fair degree of scratches, but this attack went beyond that. With each crippling strike, his mech's performance continued to decline.

Just moments later, the Handshake struck the Executioner's chest with the butt of the spear. The kinetic impact failed to cripple the damaged mech, but succeeded in stirring up the vulnerable internals.

The problem Lovejoy faced was that he couldn't get past Xandra's guard. The Handshake turned into a hedgehog in her hands. He had to worry about getting pricked everytime he attempted to strike.

"There's no point in playing it safe." Lovejoy determined after achieving another fruitless result. "I have to bet my mech against hers."

The designer of his mech focused on maximizing its power and resilience. Against the control-focused Handshake, the Executioner could not possibly outmaneuver the spear wielder.

An instructor once taught him an important lesson. "If you're losing the game, then flip the board."

He lost sight of his way. His mech was not meant to poke the Handshake like a skittish kitten. Such a tactic only resulted in a gradual defeat.

Once Lovejoy adjusted his perspective, his mood improved. He pushed away his fear of losing. He wanted to win instead of trying to avoid defeat.

"There's no choice but to go all-in. If her spear hits my mech, then so be it as long as my sword can dish out the hurt."

He slowly polished his aggression until it almost boiled over in his mind. His mech subtly amplified his thoughts. Both of their intents aligned.

Even Xandra sensed a change. The battered and beaten mech in front of her halted its declining tendency. She upped the pressure in order to interrupt whatever Lovejoy had in mind.

Instead of blocking the next spear thrust, the Executioner boldly let it scratch the sides of his lower torso. The engine buckled for a bit, but the mech quickly regained its energy. The wounded mech continued to push forward and struck down its sword with a devastating overhand chop.

Caught off-guard, Xandra acted decisively. Her mech let go of the spear and hopped away, causing the sword to miss its mark. Despite escaping the damage, she felt no better. Without a spear, her mech lost much of its reach and leverage.

As for Lovejoy, his mech's performance grew even more unsteady. Besides his power reactor, he also had to keep an eye on his engines. Thankfully, the spear did not penetrate deep enough to affect its core functionality.

With a slow grip, the Executioner pulled out the spear and held it above its shoulder.

Meanwhile, having lost its principal weapon, the Handshake retreated from the Executioner and raced towards its fallen railgun. Just as it reached the weapon, it slowed down in order to pick up the large but fragile weapon. Even if the Executioner wanted to stop the Handshake, it was too late.

That was what Xandra thought until the Executioner threw the shortened spear at her mech. The Handshake had just started to reach down and could not reorient itself in time.

The thrown spear knocked its shoulder but failed to penetrate through its armor. Though the Handshake avoided critical damage, the impact threw it off-balance and caused its hand to miss the railgun.

Lovejoy already pushed his mech forward after it hurled the spear. By the time his mech came close, the Handshake belatedly picked up its weapon and charged its capacitors.

Xandra knew she couldn't wait for a full charge. Just as the Executioner chopped towards her mech, she fired her railgun when it only charged up to thirty-nine percent.

The slug accurately hit the damaged mech's power reactor, causing the mech to experience an emergency shutdown.

Before his mech lost its power, Lovejoy channeled all of the mech's remaining energy in a single, heaven-shaking chop. Propelled by the mech's forward momentum, the weight of the sword finally crashed into the Handshake's head

and sliced down its neck. The massive sword carved up lots of systems and interfered with the mech's control systems.

For a moment, both mechs stood still.

Xandra's mech recovered first. The damage it suffered was severe, but fell short of killing it. Unfortunately, the sword remained stuck in its upper torso.

Instead of trying to move away and aggravate its wounds, the Handshake raised its railgun. The mech pressed the barrel against its disabled opponent's torso and charged up the weapon.

One percent, two percent, three percent. Its charge slowly accumulated. If not for the last attack, the railgun only needed several seconds to accumulate a sufficient charge. Right now, Xandra tried to hurry up the energy transfer.

The Executioner came to life. The mech might have lost its power reactor, but Lovejoy found a way around the situation by tapping his mech's energy cells directly. This was an extremely destructive process, as the power reactor normally moderated the highly active energy.

Flooding the contents of the energy cells directly through the mech caused its internals to overheat in seconds. The mech could only last a couple of seconds as best before all of its energy channels melted down.

The Executioner only needed two seconds to twist the sword and push it deeper into the Handshake. Its sputtering flight system pushed the mech and its sword forward. At the last moment before the mech burned out, it suddenly leveraged its sword downwards, past the vulnerable power reactor.

The tip of the sword tore through the flimsy shell around the cockpit and halved the sophisticated module that allowed the mech to be remote controlled.

According to the rules set by Leemar, the destruction of the module represented the death of the pilot. There was no coming back.

The Executioner lost all of its power right after delivering the fatal blow.

Most of the audience had paid attention to the dramatic final moments of the duel. When it became clear that the Executioner lasted longer, they rose to their feet and applauded the mech's spectacular performance. Ves, Lovejoy and the Executioner had all outdone themselves in achieving such a hard-fought victory.

Ves closed his eyes and took in the applause. Though most of the people wanted to show their appreciation to Lovejoy's incredible performance, Ves equally contributed to his mech's eventual triumph. While most designers focused on improving their mech's armor or weapons, his own was both structurally sound and resilient to damage.

"Well, part of why I focus so much on the internals is because I don't have any choice. My foundation in alloy compression is still too shallow."

That might change in the future. After witnessing and challenging so many of his fellow peers, Ves gained a better understanding of how others developed their skills. He was already satisfied with this harvest alone.

After the other duels had come to an end, three finalists remained as victors of the Leemar Open Competition.

"Our first victor is Ves Larkinson, from the Bright Republic. His alma mater was the Rittersberg University of Technology. Together with Cadet Reddy Lovejoy, he has reached the summit of this event!"

"Our second winner is Patricia Schneider, who is also a guest from the Bright Republic. She even attended the same class as Mister Larkinson at Rittersberg! What a coincidence!"

The pair's common origins was pushed to the forefront again. They both climbed over countless geniuses to reach this point. Still, nobody could figure out a compelling reason. They just happened to beat every opponent in their way.

Many of their victories were hard-won, which helped the audience accept their success. If they performed too dazzling, then people might suggest they'd been kidnapped and replaced by someone like Carter Gauge.

Fortunately for the school, Marcel Westkerke from Leemar snatched the last available slot. After an arduous battle of attrition, Westkerke's mech finally outlasted its opponent. The LIT managed to preserve its honor.

Once the clamor died down, the spotlight shone on the masters sitting atop an elevated podium. The five masters heatedly discussed among themselves behind a sound-neutralizing barrier.

During this time, all of the other mech designers who reached the third round returned to the stage. He nodded at Barakovski, who looked like she still had a hard time accepting that Ves had reached this point.

Almost everyone among the twenty-four designers waited silently for the masters to make their decisions. They all hoped to leap to the heavens in a single step. Who wouldn't want to receive the personal guidance of someone who had climbed the summit of his profession?

Ves looked up at the eminent figures and wondered who might accept him as an apprentice or a disciple.

An apprentice mostly only learned under a master. Whether they only learned a few tricks or inherited their master's entire legacy, there would be a time when they spread their own wings.

A disciple on the other hand also had the right and obligation to represent their master. The relationship between the two was lifelong and they usually forged very deep ties, both business and personal.

Ves wasn't concerned with the differences between the two. As long as a master took him in, he could finally get rid of the System's confining mission and get back to building his business.

"The masters have finished their deliberations! They are ready to announce their decisions!"

The first master stood up. Master Duchamp's charming voice reached the entire arena complex.

"Mister Devin Loesch, please step forward."

The lucky bastard joyfully separated from the others as they burned a hole into his back. Devin's mech got trashed in the second duel. So why him?

If Duchamp noted the questioning expressions of the others, he didn't show it. Instead, his gaze fell down upon Devin with a gentle expression. "Devin Loesch, do you wish to be my apprentice?"

"YES!!" Devin yelled, as if he was afraid the master would doubt him if he did not do his utmost. "I gladly accept!"

"Then follow me." The master threw out as he turned around and walked up to the ceiling.

Devin eagerly followed. He engaged his antigrav clothes and quickly caught up to the floating master. They eventually reached a floating room.

With the first master done with his selection, the elderly Master Nguyen stepped forward. "Mister Marcel Westkerke, do you wish to acknowledge me as your teacher?"

Marcel calmly stepped forward and knelt on the floor. He kowtowed three times according to the ancient tradition.

"Good. From now on, the galaxy will acknowledge you as my nominal disciple."

The pair floated away towards another private room in order to settle all of the formalities.

The third master rose up from her graceful sitting posture. Every designer held their breaths, Ves included. There were divisions between masters. While all of them had reached unimaginable heights, some of them were more distinguished than others. Those who made it a hobby to rank the masters considered Master Katzenberg to be the most formidable designer present.

Her mature voice cut through everyone's thoughts like a chime. "Miss Alyssa Fill, are you willing to become my apprentice?"

This obscure young woman originated from a tiny fourth-rate state, but graduated from another institution in the Coalition. Despite her mixed origins, she amply proved her skill even if her mech hadn't lasted very long in the final round. Much of her success could be attributed to snatching the top mech pilot in the first round.

Ves applauded Fill's success, though not everyone was glad to see her ascend. The designers from Leemar appeared especially resentful.

As anyone could imagine, the offer caught her out of the blue. She enthusiastically accepting this amazing offer. She flew to Master Katzenberg's side as if she reunited with her long lost mother.

Only two masters remained. Coincidentally, both Ves and Patricia had not been selected yet. Unless Leemar went back on their word, their turns came next.

Between Master Olson and Master Null, Ves thought it was a given that he'd be handed off to the latter. Someone as noble and graceful as Patricia was a great fit for the sophisticated Master Olson.

Reality proved otherwise. When Master Olson stepped forward, her young but stern gaze focused solely on Ves.

"Mister Ves Larkinson, do you wish to become my apprentice?"

Everyone was speechless. No one could have predicted that someone from an average background could catch the eye of someone as lofty as Master Olson. She was notoriously elitist and considered everyone with a net worth of less than a billion cols to be a cockroach.

Ves even wanted to access his bank account in order to see if some anonymous grandpa deposited a fortune in his bank account.

When he realized he held up the ceremony, he quickly walked forward and gave his response. "I accept!"

Master Olson silently maintained her gaze at him, which made him feel as if he was an ant. She wordlessly turned around and floated towards a room.

Before Ves wondered how he could get up there, a silent platform arrived before his feet. After stepping onto its surface, the hovering surface swiftly carried him in the air.

Ves barely heard Master Null accepting Patricia his nominal disciple. He still wondered why Master Olson took a fancy for him. Were the rumors wrong?

Chapter 105: Meeting

When Ves stepped into the floating room, he encountered a plain white room. Far from the luxuries he imagined in his mind, the room only contained two comfortable chairs facing its each other. The only other thing that broke up the room's monotony was a floating piece of ore.

The mineral must be something interesting to be worthy of display. Ves tried to dig through his head of any exotics that matched the ore's appearance. After a couple of seconds of fruitless searching, he gave up guessing and followed his new master to the chairs.

"Please take a seat." Master Olson gestured as she took the seat closest to the floating chunk of ore. Her admiring gaze suggested that she'd sell out her parents in an instant in order to secure it. Sadly for Ves, she felt no need to explain the origins of the ore.

After a minute of silence, Olson finally redirected her attention. With an emotionless expression, her eyes ruthlessly scanned his body and his average clothes. Compared to the finely detailed layered dress that Olson wore, he might as well look like a pauper.

"Tell me in your words why I have decided to take you on as my apprentice."

The master obviously gave him a test. Ves already expected something like this, so he simply answered as honestly as possible without pause.

"I have a solid foundation and while my skills aren't impressive, my highly developed mechanics is most compatible to your specialties. In contrast, most of the other designers chose to specialize in more exciting fields first, which won't make them good seeds for a specialization into engine design."

Olson idly tapped her chin with the tip of her finger. "You are partially correct. While your foundation is comparable to a top alumni from Leemar, your mathematics is woefully underdeveloped. No, underdeveloped is putting it lightly. It is abysmal."

The master slammed her palm onto her seatrest, expressing her dissatisfaction quite firmly to Ves. "Math is the true foundation of our profession! Do not think you can get away with outsourcing all of your

computing to automated processors! While they may be able to simulate any model, it is you who will have to construct the models in the first place!"

While Ves could reply that he could hire a mathematician to do all the heavy lifting, he found it prudent to remain silent. In truth, he prioritized the development of skills that provided a more immediate return on investment.

"I will provide you a list of recommended textbooks that you can browse in the Clifford Society's virtual portal. As my apprentice, your starting rank in the Society will automatically be set to Knight. As a Knight, you are entitled to expanded access to our internal library."

Ves silently sighed in relief once Olson referred to him as her apprentice. He hadn't screwed up in any way or made some kind of faux pas that caused the master to reconsider her choice. Right now, he only wished to keep his mouth shut and survive this meeting with his new status intact.

"As you can see, your skills and knowledge are insufficient. There are several other young mech designers who can easily outrace you in that aspect. So tell me, what else distinguishes you from those more talented than you?"

"No matter how impressive they are, most of them have lost. I'm one of the only three who made it past the finish line. Perhaps I'm lucky, but my decision-making has brought me this far. I might not be the smartest designer, but I'm confident that I can match the best of them in terms of wits."

"That is a bold statement." Olson nonchalantly replied. "Whether it is true or not, it is something you should consider for yourself. Let me ask you another question. How many mech designers are stuck in the novice phase?"

The MTA kept track of every mech designer and formally provided them with certifications of their proven skill level. Not any designer could claim to be a master. The MTA strictly tested any mech designer who wished to publicly announce their advancement.

"According to the MTA, over ninety percent of all mech designers are still novices. Of the remainder, half of them are apprentices while the other half are journeymen or higher."

"Do you think all of these novices lack the opportunity to advance? Even if they are not involved in any design work, they can still save up their cols and buy the necessary knowledge over time. Perhaps they will not be able to advance their skills in a couple of years, but they will certainly be able to do so in a couple of decades."

"There are many old designers, but if they take decades when a younger one only needs a couple of years, then it's obvious to masters and employers who they should invest in. Even wealth is not the determining factor, though it surely helps."

Even without the cols to buy a textbook, if you were talented enough, you could apply for grants or knock on the doors of a design company.

"The point I'm making is that a mech designer is more than a vessel of knowledge. We are humans, capable of both irrationality and creativity. Combined, we can create the most wondrous mechs. Too much of it, and we can easily lose sight of our basic needs. A qualified mech designer is one that can exercise sound judgement."

Ves already held some suspicions about the Leemar Open Competition. For an event that attracted tens of thousands of mech designers annually, its rounds were unusually unconventional.

They tested the designers in many different ways. Those who fared poorly in just a single aspect were mercilessly eliminated despite their abundant qualifications. Fairness was never an objective. The masters associated with the LIT simply wanted to see mech designers suffer.

Those who survived the torment have proven themselves to be the most resilient of this year's batch. It was no wonder why even Master Olson paid attention to Ves, if ever so slightly.

"In truth, among my closest subordinates, you are still unqualified to receive my personal guidance. Unlike my disciples, you are older and you have already found your own way. It is up to you to see it to the end. For now, access to the resources provided by the Clifford Society is sufficient. You can return to me once you have advanced to become Journeyman Mech Designer."

Ves expected to be brushed off in some way. A master did not lack for apprentices. Someone at his level was an infant in her eyes. He still needed lots of growing up before he could be of use.

Since Ves only sought to become an apprentice in order to finish his damned mission, the result satisfied him as well. He had no desire for someone watching over his shoulders and finding out about the System.

"I am fine with this arrangement." Ves replied in order to show he wasn't ungrateful or anything. "I've set up a small business in the Bright Republic and I don't plan on giving it up. The Republic is my home."

"That is a good sentiment. A mech designer must always have a home at heart." Master Olson softly praised. "It may be difficult to keep in touch across the star sector, but you may always contact me via your comm if its an emergency. My subordinates should be able to take care of any routine issues. You can get in touch with them through the Clifford Society."

In essence, the Clifford Society was a comprehensive club that did more than bring together Leemar's best alumni and contestants. It also provided a ready-made network for newly inducted disciples and apprentices.

Master Olson patiently spent the next half hour explaining her expectations on his apprenticeship. Despite the rumors surrounding Master Olson, she had been surprisingly accommodating so far. Though she still appeared cold and aloof, she patiently guided Ves through the formalities of becoming her apprentice.

After signing a bunch of digital paperwork, Ves officially gained a new identity as her apprentice. Along with this enviable status, he gained a permanent residency status in the Friday Coalition. No longer would he be considered a total foreigner, which was highly advantageous if he ever decided to do business here.

"Leemar prizes independence. Though you have not gone through our school's rigorous regime, your independent mech workshop constitutes a real-life test. I do not have the habit of holding the hands of my apprentices. Do not cry for me for help if you've only bumped your toe. Make something of yourself and grow from your experiences."

In other words, Master Olson wasn't about to hand Ves a boatload of cols. He had to earn his money with his own two hands. Master Olson wouldn't lift a finger if his business went bankrupt. He should only really ask for help if he encountered a life-threatening situation.

When the meeting came to an end, Master Olson passed him a couple of gifts. First, she retrieved a secure alloy briefcase from seemingly nowhere.

"Open it once you are somewhere private. I recommend you do so on your new ship you've won."

Next, Master Olson extended her hand towards the floating rock. Somehow, palm glowed to life, as if it turned into a hand-sized plasma cutter. With a careful motion, she cut a ball-sized piece from the surface of the rock. She passed the ball to Ves.

"This is a treasure. You will thank me if you ever find out its use."

With those words, she practically shooed him away, leaving her to gaze at the floating ore like it was her husband. A floating platform brought him to an isolated section of the arena, away from the press of the crowd.

A mech pilot garbed in a skin-tight suit leaned against a wall. Once Ves stepped from the platform, the pilot came up and energetically shook his hand.

"Are you Ves Larkinson?"

"Cadet Lovejoy?"

This was the first time they came face to face. Both of them performed above and beyond their limits in order to make it to the top.

They grew closer after a brief chat. Even if they didn't understand each other's fields, they both appreciated their partner's expertise.

"Now that you've won this year's competition, what will you do after you finish your studies?"

"I've already received an offer from the Carnegie Group. I'll be entering an exclusive training program for potential expert pilots."

"That's impressive. I'm sure a major power like the Carnegie Group can polish your talent."

Expert pilots enjoyed the same status as a senior mech designer. They were the true elites who piloted the best advanced mechs of any Mech Corps.

Along with this offer, Cadet Lovejoy also received numerous privileges. Potentates always enjoyed more rights, and as his worth increased, his benefits grew correspondingly.

For once in his life, Ves did not grow jealous. He used to slavishly devote his life to becoming a mech pilot and follow his father's footsteps. After undergoing the past couple of days, his eyes opened to the splendor of his profession.

In his heart, he had already moved on from those childish dreams.

"If you ever visit the Friday Coalition again, be sure to give me a call. If I'm not on duty, I'd be glad to show you around!"

"Thanks a lot. I'll be sure to look you up if I do."

Ves left the arena complex and found his way outside. He had to ask a bot for assistance in order to reunite with Dietrich and Lucky.

"My man Ves! Congratulations on your ass-kicking win!"

"Haha it wasn't easy, that's for sure!"

While Ves and Dietrich talked about the competition, Lucky stared hungrily at the chunk of ore that Master Olson gifted him. Ves noticed his gem cat's preoccupation.

"Woah there, not yet little buddy. I want to look up the minerals first. If I can't find out its composition, I'll let you have it for dinner. It's a promise."

The cat resentfully meowed at him as if it was a given that the ore should end up in his belly. While Ves was convinced the rock should be worth a fortune, he already won plenty of prizes today.

Lucky had accompanied him for several months without receiving much in return. Ves thought it was about time he indulged his pet for once.

Chapter 106: Advancement

The Arkon Mark I was 100 meters of pure craftsmanship. As a mech designer, Ves appreciated mechs the most, but he had a decent eye for ships.

The Arkon model had a sleek, curving shape. Her outer plating gleamed in white. A predatory pattern of sky blue accents broke up the monotony. If Ves had to describe it, it looked like a fish with its tail chopped off. Massive thrusters at the aft allowed the ship to traverse space with speed, while its stubby wings helped balance the ship if it descended onto a planet.

The ship did not come with a name. For now, she merely held a numerical designation. Ves could think up a name for the ship and register it later at any Coalition port at any point.

Compared to the gigantic but sluggish passenger ships and the smaller but 'economic' transports, the Arkon Mark I was built to satisfy the vanity of the rich. The designers of this luxury vessel pretty much picked the most expensive options available.

This meant that the Arkon was faster and more resilient than any other ship of her size. In formal terms, the Arkon was classified as a corvette. These vessels ranged from fifty meters to two-hundred meters. They were built for speed, evasion and sometimes stealth.

Compared to a regular corvette, the Arkon featured extensive automation. Leemar even included a complementary navigator bot, so Ves could theoretically operate the vessel without a single crew member.

"Not that it's a good idea. A man should never rely on bots."

A vessel controlled by bots and programs was highly vulnerable to malicious digital intrusion. Ves intended to hire a human pilot in the future.

The luxurious furnishings made up for the cramped interior. Dietrich's eyes widened at the fully stocked bar and instantly swiped a bottle of liquor. "Do you realize how much I can sell this bottle of Doomsday No. 8? It's worth at least a hundred-and-fifty thousand credits back home!"

While Dietrich slobbered all over the complementary booze, Ves inspected the three decks for any other surprises.

The cargo bay was situated at the lower deck. As advertised, it contained enough space to hold four standard-sized containers. The bay came with an integrated lifting system that allowed for effortless loading and unloading of any cargo. For now, Dietrich's refurbished mech took up much of the space, so Ves had no opportunity to test this system.

Other supplies took up the rest of the space in this deck. For example, Ves bumped into large barrels that stored the ship's water, air and fuel. As the Arkon ran on high-density fuel, the designers put a lot of effort into securing the volatile mixture. The protective shell around the fuel tanks could take a dozen hits from a mech-sized weapon.

A lot of compartments operated out of the middle decks. The all-important engineering compartment regulated both the FTL drive as well as the standard thruster engines. It also regulated the power reactor.

Ves could imagine if pirates boarded his ship and wrested control of engineering, they'd practically be in effective command of the entire corvette.

Besides some boring systems such as the air and water recyclers, the middle decks also came with a fully furnished lab and miniature workshop. Leemar generously furnished both compartments with state-of-the-art devices.

Though Ves lacked the expertise to fully utilize the lab, he handed off the chunk of mineral to the lab's expensive lab bot. While it was fairly stupid compared to a human scientist, it was better than nothing. With the ore in its hands, the bot should be able to find out a couple of things about the ore.

While Ves had nothing to do in the workshop area, he still went over all the supplied gear. The workshop enabled him to do some basic maintenance and

repair on mechs. The ship's engineer could also borrow the workshop's tools to keep the Arkon running.

What Ves found particularly surprising was that the workshop came with a mini-sized 3D printer. The model was recent and came with many advanced capabilities.

Unfortunately, due to its scale, Ves couldn't replace his old 3D printer with this state-of-the-art device. The small printer simply couldn't fabricate anything larger than a person, and if Ves wanted to print something advanced, he had to wait a long time.

The mini printer still provided Ves with another tool. If he ever needed to fabricate an advanced component, he could turn to this device instead of seeking outside help.

The bridge of the Arkon was placed at the bow of the middle deck. Ves had no clue how to pilot the ship, so he entrusted the controls to the expert hands of the navigator bot.

The top deck took up less space due to the Arkon's sloping form. The deck mainly offered comfort and accommodation to the passengers and crew.

The smaller cabins held enough space for four. The beds could be expanded into double bunks if Ves ever took in more crew.

The mess hall offered a comfortable place for people to eat their meals. In its standard setting, the dining area looked like an austere cafeteria. Crew members could eat their meals in peace.

When Ves changed the dining area's mode, the normal furnishings receded and the room turned into a classy dining room that could also function as a conference room. The wooden furniture and soft carpets gave the transformed room a sophisticated ambiance that would certainly help in impressing any guests.

The food preparation system was state of the art. The hall also came with an automated food fabricator that prepared any meals programmed in its systems. The food fabricator took in standardized nutrient packs as input and fabricated natural-looking meals such as spaghetti bolognese or instant noodles.

If Ves ever grew tired with fabricated meals, he could hire a cook to man the attached kitchen.

The observation chamber came with a retractable roof that allowed the occupants to gaze at the stars. The chamber also functioned as a leisure room. It came with programmable seating that allowed Ves to summon up sofas or bar stools as he needed. Dietrich currently monopolized the bar set to the side while Lucky cautiously sniffed at fish swimming lazily inside the aquarium set on the other end.

The final two compartments at the bow of the ship turned out to be the ship's best cabins. The staterooms offered enough space for the captain and the owner to take care of some paperwork. One of the extensive secure closets already came with a new set of clothes.

"Are all of these antigrav clothes?!"

The freebie certainly came as a surprise. Though all of the sets looked simple, Ves quickly realized there was more under the surface. All of the sets could be reprogrammed, allowing them to change their shape and color.

Not that Ves thought to play around with this function. To his underdeveloped fashion sense, the clothes were already miles ahead of his old wardrobe. He quickly changed to a set but left the float function for later. The last thing he needed was to bump his head onto the ceiling.

He retrieved another set of antigrav clothes and left it onto the bed of the spare stateroom. He already received more than enough gifts. Dietrich deserved a share as well.

Once he finished his tour, he entered his stateroom. In the privacy of his office, it was time to reactivate the System and retrieve his rewards.

The System inundated him with notifications once he ran the program. Ves quickly glanced through most of them, only bothering to pause at the most important messages.

He held up the mech evaluation report for the Unicorn, his rushed design for the free-for-all.

X-Factor: C+

He indeed broke through, though sadly he couldn't replicate the result. His Sword Dancer and Executioner designs only received a middling score of C- by the stingy System. He wasn't too worried. Once he had a taste of a higher boundary, he could still recall the sensations.

After pushing all of the evaluation reports along with the handful of DP the System rewarded, he finally got to the most important messages.

[Congratulations for upgrading your status to Apprentice Mech Designer. You have taken your first step into the path of a supreme. The Mech Designer System will now initiate an upgrade. Please stand by.]

"What are you doing!?"

His comm unit physically changed shape. The thin armband-shaped device started to melt in front of his eyes. For a moment, Ves panicked at the sight. Would his wrist melt off?

He calmed down a few seconds later once he realized his comm did not melt into a hot piece of metal. Instead, it merely broke down into tiny nanomachines of some sort.

It first spread out an ultrathin layer of metal until it engulfed his entire hand. Ves stood uncomfortably still while the metal constantly poked at his skin. After completing whatever it did, the metal receded into an unobtrusive brace. When Ves poked at it with his fingers, he found the comm to be surprisingly pliable and springy.

"Smart metal?"

Whatever its composition, Ves was sure the System massively upgraded his previously average comm unit. He'd dig through the changes later. First, he had to go over the rest of the upgrades.

[Your access to the Store has been expanded. You are now able to exchange more advanced items with Design Points.]

Considering that even the cheapest junk in the Store cost a fortune, Ves was not that eager to throw more DP in this bottomless pit.

[You are now able to purchase copper lottery tickets at the Lottery at the preferential price of 500 Design Points.]

That might be something interesting. Ves remembered he used up three of them at the start. While they gave him nothing, the lottery might hide something useful. The question was if he wanted to test this assumption by throwing away lots of DP.

[The Designer module has unlocked the Superpublish ability. When completing any designs, you are able to Superpublish them. In exchange for forfeiting all your current and future rewards, the Designer will automatically enhance your design by a factor of ten percent. You are only able to Superpublish a design once every standard year.]

This was a massive reward. Ten percent might not sound like much, but every percent mattered with regard to designs. The only snag was that giving up all of that DP certainly hurt a lot. The System obviously did not encourage him to use this ability often, given that the cooldown lasted an entire year.

"I should keep this trump card in reserve. I can learn a lot by watching how the System surpasses my design."

The messages ended at that point. It seemed the System did not intend to lavish Ves in riches for his successful promotion. Ves awkwardly scratched his head. He expected more.

"Well, I still have my new master's gifts."

He received two physical presents from Master Olson. The lab was still busy analyzing the mysterious piece of ore, so Ves turned to the secure suitcase resting on his desk.

As an engineer, he recognized its extraordinary construction. The metal surface had been treated with advanced alloy compression. The material worth of the coffer alone exceeded a million bright credits. To Master Olson, such an amount was chump change.

Unlocking the case took quite a bit of effort. Leemar somehow got a hold of his biometrics, so he had to let the digital lock scan his retina, sample his blood, measure his breath and read a random article aloud.

The lock disengaged after making sure that Ves was not some kind of shape shifting alien. The padded interior only held two distinct items. Ves first picked the item placed on top. He recognized the device as a miniaturized shield generator. A recording of Master Olson's voice popped up from nowhere.

"What you are holding is a life-saving treasure. This shield generator possesses enough power to withstand a single large-caliber railgun projectile. Its development is a closely guarded secret and you should never reveal it to

anyone. It possesses its own methods of concealment, but for your own good, you should better keep it out of sight."

Ves thought such devices were exclusive to the upper crust of first-rate states. Perhaps his cognition of high society needed to be revised. Regardless, such a small and amazing shield must have cost his master a lot. He appreciated her generosity.

When Ves turned to the second object, his eyes turned a little weird. After removing the strange foliage, he held a medical injector. The vial inserted in the injector contained a strange, glowing green liquid. The label on the vial only displayed a single code:

M-21 INITIATING ELIXIR

"What you are holding is an even greater secret than the shield generator. This secret is so well-kept that you should extinguish any thoughts of leaking it to the public."

Ves already had a good idea what the mysterious vial contained. Holding it meant he had finally stepped into the upper ranks of society.

Chapter 107: Injection

The contents of the vial turned out to be a freshly synthesized gene boost elixir, tailored to his physique. The conspiracy theories were definitely true. Those in power controlled a method of manipulating a person's genes and improve their attributes.

The secret did not affect him as much as others, as he already enjoyed something similar from the candies the System handed out. He patiently listened to Master Olson's recording as she extensively warned him of all the ways he could end up dead if he did anything improper.

"The M-21 is an entry-level gene boost designed to reconstruct your body and pave the way for future injections. The M-series elixirs are particularly suited

for scientists and engineers. The first dose has a pronounced effect on your intelligence. Due to their extreme effects, it is recommended that you ingest a premium nutrient pack before you proceed with the injection."

Ves ordered a household bot to retrieve a nutrient pack from Arkon's mess hall. After chewing up the mushy bar of essential nutrients, his belly quickly became bloated. Only starving people ate an entire nutrient pack without processing.

Without further ado, he placed the business end of the injector against his arm and pressed the button.

"Guhgugh!"

The elixir burned through his veins and travelled up his arm before spreading out. The fluid somehow engulfed his entire body in seconds. His flesh and bones shook with excitement as the fluid washed over them simultaneously. His brain received special emphasis as up to thirty percent of the gene boost made their way up.

A few indeterminate minutes went by as Ves collapsed to the floor. While his body suffered through the pangs of rebirth, the empty injector silently disintegrated into dust, which slowly broke down into smaller particles that was swept away by the ship's ventilation.

After Ves finally recovered, half an hour had already gone by. His bloated stomach had turned into an empty pit. He could certainly grab another bite. Eager to see how he progressed, Ves called up his Status.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 815

Attributes

Strength: 0.8

Dexterity: 0.7

Endurance: 0.8

Intelligence: 1.3

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

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression I]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

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

Abilities

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

Evaluation: An apprentice who has taken a step in the true world of mech design.

His status hadn't changed much. Most of his rewards for completing his mission went towards upgrading his privileges. It was as if the System stole all the benefits and left him with a pittance.

Regarding his attributes, the M-21 gene boost certainly made a difference, though it was not as big as he thought. Both his strength, endurance and intelligence received a small 0.1 bump. Ves could imagine that anyone might faint at the sight. As someone who already ate a couple of candies, he merely noted the bump and wondered what it would take to get the next injection.

"Something like this should still be out of reach. The Clifford Society should have more information."

After taking a brief sonic shower, he dressed himself exited his bathroom and walked over to the full-sized mirror next to his closet. The shower's drying program even styled his dark brown hair into a neatly combed look.

The cut of his suit fit him like a glove. These antigrav clothes came with the most perfect measuring systems. It even adjusted to his changed physique without having to lift a finger.

"Wow, that gene boost sure brushed up my appearance." Ves stated admiringly. Even the System didn't offer cosmetic boosts from its Store, at least to his knowledge.

The gene boost's physique enhancement not only strengthened his muscles, but also smoothed out his physical features. His skin lost all of its blemishes and his face appeared more symmetrical. Though he'd never be called handsome, at least he distanced himself from the skinny nerd look.

"Should I grow a beard?"

No matter the era, facial hair always gave men a dignified look if properly groomed. Even if Ves knew little about styling, he could borrow his ship's amazing styling program to groom a sophisticated beard.

"Hm, I'm too young. People will think I'm trying too hard."

He just became an apprentice to one of the Friday Coalition's vaunted masters. Even if Master Olson was one of the youngest among their ranks, she had a bright future ahead of her. His new status had turned into his defining characteristic. Even someone as distinguished as Barakovski fell short.

"I'll be sure to squeeze my status as often as I need."

As a mech designer with ambition, he didn't want to rely on his master's name forever. He had no qualms of borrowing his status to deter anyone who wished him ill.

"Well, let's get this ship underway."

The Arkon came fully stocked with enough fuel, food, water and air to travel across the star sector. Ves summoned a tipsy Dietrich to the bridge.

"Cool bridge man, if a little vulnerable. There's hardly any cover here, so you better pray pirates won't reach this place."

Dietrich had a point. The Arkon had been designed first and foremost for the rich. While the ship incorporated some defenses, the interior prioritized aesthetics. Retractable defenses were only effective up to a point.

"I asked you up here to consult you on a couple of matters. First, you're aware that I've offended a couple of people during the competition, right?"

"Haha, you sure kicked a lot of people's butts!"

"Even though Master Olson took me in, I can't be sure that someone is out to get me. I've instructed my navigator bot to plot a circuitous route back to the Bright Republic. Take a look at the map."

A projection of the entire star sector appeared in view. A bright red line originated from the Leemar System and reached out to a lightly populated system. The route kept hopping between less crowded systems until it reached the border of the Bright Republic.

"We have to make fifty-six stops, but we'll still be back in a month. Unlike passenger ships, our Arkon won't be wasting time travelling to the interior of a star system in order to exchange passengers. Our ship will rest at the edge of each star system and leave when her FTL drive has finished cycling."

A ship could not hop into FTL immediately upon disengaging it. The FTL drive required at least a couple of hours of cleaning, maintenance and inspection. Military-grade drives cycled faster, but required a seasoned engineer to keep watch.

Dietrich stumblingly tried to make sense of the elongated route. "I don't have any complaints, but are we really skipping all of the port systems? We're taking a massive detour here."

"I don't mind if I have to delay my homecoming. What's more important is that my enemies won't be able to predict my schedule."

There were too many star systems in the sector. Ves deliberately included uninhabited systems in his planned route in order to mess up anyone's guesses. With the inclusion of these systems, anyone who wanted to track him down had to devote thousands of ships at each hop. He didn't think anyone would be crazy to divert so many ships for a trivial Apprentice Mech Designer.

"The second thing I'd like your input on is a name for this ship. We won't be visiting any other port system so this is our only chance to register a name."

Ves wanted to gift his Arkon with a dignified name. According to the laws of both the Friday Coalition and the Bright Republic, as long as he didn't come up with something offensive, he could pick any name.

"A ship is like your personal mech. It's part of your identity." Dietrich sagely explained, as if the liquor made him smarter. "The thing is the Arkon is already a beast. You don't have to crack your skull in order to come up with something cool."

After throwing a couple of names back and forth, Ves eventually decided upon the Barracuda. The ship already looked like the fish, so the name fit her like a glove. It also sounded cool enough without trying too hard.

After passing on the name to Leemar's traffic control, Ves quickly received a notification that they've approved the christening. The sides of his ship shimmered for a moment before they displayed the new name in a bold black font over the vessel's bright white surface.

"No wonder the rich like to throw good money after bad on these toys." Dietrich remarked with a hint of envy. "With a ship like this, you'll never worry about the hassle."

The Barracuda's extensive automation was her biggest selling point. Ves was determined to keep this ship in his possession. No matter how much money he had to throw in this money pit, the ship's ease of use allowed him to maintain her without involving too many outsiders.

"She's a good means of escape if anything happens."

In a galaxy full of tension, no planet was safe. Even a quiet and boring state such as the Bright Republic had to face a lot of threats.

The ship ascended into the skies. Ves bid farewell to Leemar-2 as the Barracuda effortlessly escaped the planet's gravity well. The archipelagos claimed by the Leemar Institute of Technology slowly faded underneath the clouds and haze of the planet's atmosphere.

For the next few hours, Ves observed the navigator bot as it efficiently slipped past the crowded traffic near Leemar-2's orbit. It frequently sent automated requests to the system's traffic control and received updates on its assigned routes that led it to the edge of the star system.

As a small and nimble corvette, the Barracuda only required half a day to travel from the inner system to the very edge. Surprisingly, the system's security force approved his departure after only a cursory scan. Their inspectors hadn't even boarded the ship.

"Looks like flaunting my status as an apprentice is quite useful."

The FTL drive transitioned into a different dimension without problem. The Barracuda was on its way. Feeling a bit uncertain, Ves summoned up the diagnostics of the ship. While he couldn't understand the details, the operating system detected no anomalies. His ship wasn't about to explode.

"Now that I've got some free time on my hand, I might as well take a look at the Clifford Society."

Technically, Master Olson was merely a guest professor at Leemar. Despite the short duration of her stay, she made several agreements with Leemar that smoothed over the rights and privileges of her apprentices and disciples.

Thus, when he returned to his stateroom and visited the Society's virtual portal, the room's projection came to life. A vivid world came into existence. Highly advanced projectors and other systems simulated a very realistic environment full of sights, sounds and smells.

Like a god observing his worshippers, Ves stood on a cloud that overlooked a vast and sparsely populated mountain range. A few moments later, another person warped into view.

"Ah, welcome. I was expecting you." The middle-aged man. "Are you enjoying your new ship? We've added a couple of extras once we've learned you've received this prize."

The man wore sophisticated antigrav clothes in a much more elaborate style. Custom jewels adorned his suit jacket in an intricate geometric pattern. An emblem of a fist enclosing a blue rose was pasted onto his chest. Ves recognized it as Master's Olson personal Master Mark, an exclusive symbol assigned by the MTA to mark her designs.

"Are you my senior?"

"That's right. I am Horatio Veclan. I am Carmin's oldest apprentice and one of her personal assistants. I am in charge with keeping track of her subordinates and managing their needs."

Horatio gestured with his hands, throwing his virtual contact details to Ves.

"Contact me if you have any questions. You don't want to bother Carmin with a trivial issue. She takes quite a dim view to idiots who waste her time."

Only someone close to Master Olson could have the guts to call her by her first name. Ves decided it didn't hurt to get acquainted with Horatio.

"Can you introduce me to the Clifford Society?"

"Why certainly! That's why I'm here. If you will follow me, we will descend and tour the virtual facilities. There are a lot of hidden gems down there if you know where to look."

Through certain gestures, Ves learned how to descend his virtual body. He followed Horatio downwards. He was looking forward to what this exclusive society of mech designers offered.

Chapter 108: Clifford Society

The virtual structures built on top and around the mountains were remarkably diverse. Some were shaped like ancient temples, while others borrowed from the latest architecture.

"Are you wondering why nothing matches? The Society is not in a habit of imposing firm controls. We're not the Konsu Clan after all. Every member above the rank of squire has the right to place a permanent structure in this mountain range. The higher your rank, the larger your personal space."

It turned out that the Clifford Society ranked its members in a simple hierarchy.

The lowest rung consisted of Squires. They formed the largest member group as each year many of the top 500 in the Leemar Open Competition chose to join. They only had basic level access to the Society's resources, but for the designers with shallow backgrounds, it was an oasis in a desert. They had to earn merits through missions in order to pay for more exclusive services.

The next step up were the Knights. Only rarely do Squires get promoted to this rank. Most of the apprentices, disciples and regular middle-ranked mech designers were Knights. They formed quite a substantial influence, and enjoyed more extensive access to the Society's exclusive libraries, Mission Hall and restricted lectures.

As Ves entered the society with this rank, Horatio gave him a better idea on what to expect with this status.

"Don't bother mingling with the Squires unless you want something done. You can assign a mission at the Mission Hall and attach a small reward. I can guarantee you that hundreds of the little buggers will flock to your task."

It appeared Horatio took a very dim view of Squires. Considering the mixed composition of this year's top 500, Ves understood his disdain. Due to the competition's weird format, plenty of unqualified mech designers had slipped through. These lucky bastards probably stagnated later on due to their lack of talent and work ethic.

"It's best to interact with your peers. Every Knight is an exceptional individual who has earned their rank. While you are able to earn merits the boring way through fulfilling missions, it's more convenient to trade for knowledge or assistance with your fellow Knights."

When Horatio guided him to the Mission Hall, Ves knew why he dismissed the Mission Hall. Many of the missions appropriate for Knights lasted for months or years.

They included missions like tutoring a spoiled brat until he successfully graduated with a degree in mech design. Such a mission rewarded the taker with fifty merits if he succeeded after five years.

"Don't underestimate the value of fifty merits. While there's no direct equivalent in cols, Knights like you often treat one merit as one million cols."

This meant that a single merit was worth at least a hundred million bright credits! He could fabricate four Marc Antony mechs with that much money!

"As a Knight, you are entitled to ten merits per standard year. This is merely play money to tide you over. To illustrate the value of a merit, let's take a look at the libraries."

The Society's library complex took over an entire plateau. Several different greco-roman structures offered varying levels of knowledge. The Star Library

was meant for Squires and contained books and articles that ranged for novice to apprentice level. A Knight had unrestricted access to every book.

The Moon Library offered deeper knowledge. The books and articles in its catalog were of a higher level than the textbooks that Ves had previously bought from the open market. The vast majority of its books was at the journeyman level, though the highest floor also offered Senior-level books.

Knights like Ves had to exchange merits to gain a virtual copy of a book. He could only receive them onto special secure tablets in order to safeguard the knowledge. These tablets featured an abundance of encryption and other forms of copy protection.

The way they worked was very strange. If Ves wanted to read a book, he had to swallow a special neural capsule tailored to his DNA that temporarily reconfigured his optic nerves to read the nonsensical patterns displayed on the tablet. His brain would automatically interpret the squiggly lines and symbols into legible words.

The Society provided Knights with only twenty neural capsules. This meant that Ves received only twenty attempts to read through an entire textbook. He had to pay more merits if he wanted another batch of neural capsules.

"As you can see Ves, the foundational journeyman-level books only costs one merit for Knights. The more advanced books range from five to fifty merits. As for the senior-level books, don't even think about it until you've accumulated at least a thousand merits."

Even Ves needed to complete a ten-year mission if he wanted to earn a thousand merits. Some missions paid more or lasted shorter, but they also entailed a lot more dangers. Some of those missions placed the takers in the middle of active conflicts!

After leaving the structure, Horatio led Ves to the front of the most magnificent library. "The Sun Library is the holy grail of Leemar's Mech Development Faculty. Every professor of the LIT has donated at least a single book. Over the years, the amount of knowledge it has accumulated is very terrifying, even if most of it is dated."

"Have you ever had the opportunity to read a book from this library?" Ves curiously asked. Horatio looked rather old. He must have worked under Master Olson for many years.

Horatio puffed up his chest. "I completed a critical assignment for Master Olson a couple of years ago. I gained the right to access a single book from the Sun Library. Oh, you can't imagine the brilliance seeped into every page! To experience the essence of their specialties is a marvellous chance!"

"Ahem!" He awkwardly coughed once he realized his emotions got the better of him. He quickly regained his composure as a friendly senior. "The knowledge within this library is extremely dangerous for young mech designers like you. Unless you have gained a lot of experience and tempered your design philosophy to a strong degree, you better not sneak a peek."

Ves nodded in agreement, though he reserved some skepticism. How could something as innocent as books break a mech designer's mind?

They descended down the mountain range and entered one of the cities. Unlike the eclectic mix on the mountain tops, the city looked like a proper medieval castle settlement. Simulated people added a lot of livelihood to the scene, though all of them ignored the Society members as if they didn't exist.

"This is where the Squires can rent a virtual home or storefront. It is not the most harmonic environment, but it is sufficient for most of them if they wish to advertise their services."

Many squires had set up stores or stalls offering wares for merits. They also showed off their capabilities in the hopes of getting hired by someone who has merits to spare.

Looking at these talented mech designers debasing themselves for a couple of merits showed Ves how brutal the world can be. Squires who joined the Clifford Society started at the bottom and had to claw their way upwards. It reminded him of the harsh circumstances that students of the LIT had to go through in order to survive.

"These squires make excellent lackeys if you're short on manpower. The Society binds us all together. The rules are very strict against those who violate any contracts made within its bounds."

They reached the final destination of their tour. Horatio had led Ves onto an upscale bazaar where Knights and those of even higher ranks had set up their own storefronts.

Almost anything could be exchanged with merits. From completed mech designs to wreckage of highly advanced mechs, as long as you had merits, it was yours. Ves widened his eyes when he stopped in front of a store selling fabrication equipment.

"That's a decent 3D printer." Horatio remarked as he eyed the machine. It was a bog-standard printer common in the Coalition. "It's nothing to me, but it should be adequate for your needs."

The hefty price tag of five hundred merits discouraged Ves. There were not many ways in which he could earn so many merits quickly. He reluctantly let go of the shiny toys and followed Horatio as he pointed out the most notable stores.

The tour came at an end when they reached a fountain. Horatio reached inside his pocket and retrieved a merit ticket. He threw it into the fountain without hesitation.

"People say that you can gain some luck if you throw some merits in to the fountain." Horatio smirked at Ves when he looked bewildered at the waste. "You might think that I'm throwing away a virtual object into a virtual fountain for nothing. If you believe the multiverse is fixed and follows a defined set of physical laws, then you might be right."

Ves could guess the point he was making. This might even be a hidden test of sorts.

"I believe we have only skimmed the workings of our reality. There is much we have to learn." He said as he remorselessly tossed a valuable merit ticket into the waters of the fountain. Inwardly, he groaned at the loss. He only had nine merits left.

His guide said nothing and merely watched on. Once the ticket fully submerged, he started to float. "That's it for this little tour. Take care of yourself and work hard to become a Journeyman Mech Designer. Once you have reached this level, you will gain access to the Titanium Garden, which is Carmin's exclusive portal. It's not as lively as the Clifford Society, but it offers exclusive resources that will help you advance."

The Titanium Garden existed both as a virtual portal and as a physical location on Master Olson's home planet. Master Olson owed her rapid rise to the Vermeer Group, but her true allegiance was more complex. She proactively partnered with masters from other groups within the Coalition and maintained a neutral stance in all intra-Coalition turf wars. In essence, she was welcome everywhere.

While Ves could climb the Clifford Society's hierarchy, it remained a way for the Carnegie Group to exert influence on him. It would become messy if he got involved in the complex politics between the two groups.

If he had to make a choice, then he was better off favoring the Vermeer Group. Still, as a foreigner, Ves hoped to stay out of this cesspool and develop his mechs quietly in the Bright Republic.

"For now, try to take advantage of what the Clifford Society has to offer." Horatio advised Ves in a sincere manner. "The resources they offer to lower-ranked mech designers is quite comprehensive. Make sure to develop a solid foundation and develop your specialties one step at a time. While you shouldn't be in a hurry, I expect you to reach journeyman in a decade at most."

Ves didn't have to ask what would happen if he failed to meet that request. As a disgrace to his master, he'd be stripped of his apprenticeship and kicked away like a piece of trash.

"Understood. I'll be sure to work as hard as possible."

"One more thing. If you are stuck in your studies, feel free to contact me if you need some guidance. Do note that my time is also scarce, so you better have some merits on hand."

That left him with a way out if he absolutely got stuck. Ves did not expect to consult Horatio often due to his reliance on the System to advance his skills. Cramming books like a human lost its charm when he could simply spend some DP and gain complete mastery over a new skill.

"Well, I'll probably give this book learning a thing since I'm short on DP."

Once Horatio left, Ves exited the simulated environment as well. He could borrow some books later. First he had to finish the ones he purchased previously.

After going through so many battles at Leemar, Ves felt the need to consolidate his new gains by revisiting some theories he didn't completely understand. It was a good way to pass the time while the Barracuda made her way to the Bright Republic.

Chapter 109: Making Plans

The Barracuda quietly traversed the stars. By visiting out-of-the-way star systems, the Barracuda avoided most of the bustle. This led to a quiet series of hops as the Barracuda kept engaging her FTL drive with just a few hours of downtime.

While Dietrich was steadily sampling the ship's alcohol, Ves consolidated his gains from Leemar. The pressure and the lack of time during the competition caused him to unleash his potential. In his inspired state, he made several risky design choices that gave him a new perspective on design and implementation.

"Even if the System stuffs an entire library of knowledge in my brain, I still have much to learn. I thought I thoroughly mastered journeyman mechanics once I upgraded it through the System, but now I've found out it's just the start."

Books remained useful to him even if he still relied on the System. Different sources of knowledge provided contrasting perspectives. Some shined a light on issues that others neglected. Ves could never read too many books, though in practice he still needed to work for a living.

He sighed when he thought what he might face when he returned home. While the industry insiders from the Coalition only raised an eyebrow to his status, the hicks from the Republic might start treating him like the Vesian king.

No matter what, Ves was certain he could milk his status into increasing his sales. Brand and reputation mattered the most in the mech industry. They

also hung on his neck like shackles. Any designs he sold had to meet a minimum standard of excellence. Anything he released that turned out to be lacking would affect not only him but also his master.

He didn't want to wait until the Barracuda arrived at her destination. Ves raised his comm and summoned up his list of contacts.

His finger hovered over Carlos Shaw's name. Compared to the Squires of the Clifford Society who were begging to be hired, Carlos fell awfully short. After a few minutes of consideration, Ves decided he'd rather have someone he trusted over someone who's only in it for the merits.

"My first employee should be someone I can treat as a partner. I'll be far too busy coming up with new designs to bother with managing my future subordinates. With Carlos on hand, he could act as my Horatio by keeping an eye on his expanding business."

Ves had been ambivalent about expanding the scale of his business. Not to mention the cost of equipment, he simply couldn't afford to split his focus.

After his ordeal in Leemar, he gained a different perspective. Every great mech designer needed a mountain of resources in order to advance.

Designing and fabricating one mech at a time took too much time and earned only a limited amount of revenue.

If Ves wanted to accelerate his timetable, then he had to let go of his need for absolute control and delegate responsibilities. Though he hadn't started to expand his workshop yet, he wanted to bring in Carlos early.

His finger pressed the name, causing his comm to connect to the galactic net and route his call across the star sector. The Barracuda's quantum entanglement node allowed him to connect successfully to the galactic net without any shenanigans happening due to the ship travelling in FTL mode.

"Ves!" His eyes brightened with hope. "It's good to see you again! I've watched your performance at home. Patricia and you have really made our little Republic famous. The two of you are heroes now!"

"That's great news, but I didn't call you to rest on my laurels."

He briefly explained his future expansion plans to Carlos. Though he warned his friend that it might take a year or two to get the ball rolling, Carlos wouldn't be sitting idle in between.

"That's a great offer!" Carlos replied with emotion. "I can finally say goodbye to my stupid quality control job."

"I'm not hiring you to be a full-time mech designer, so don't get your hopes up yet. For now, I'd like you to polish your assembly and fabrication capabilities. You'll be taking over my machines whenever I receive a routine order."

"Don't worry Ves. After working in quality control, I've learned all the ways the fabrication process could go wrong. I can guarantee you that I won't be sloppy!"

After finishing his talk with Carlos, Ves hung up and called his cousin Melinda.

"Hi Melinda, did I call at a bad time?"

"I'm still on duty, but my boss doesn't mind a short break." Melinda said as she was fiddling with her Planetary Guard uniform. "You're a big deal now back at home."

"I've heard. I called you up because I want to ask you if I'm still under investigation."

One of his mechs had been used to commit atrocities in Bentheim. Last he heard, the Republic's investigators wanted to bring in Ves for a very firm talk.

"All inquiries involving you have stopped." Melinda responded with a smile. "Your impressive achievement gave the investigators a scare. They changed their stance overnight and quietly pulled back their feelers."

The influence of a Master Mech Designer was so dreadful that people proactively bowed out of his way. He didn't even have to say anything for others to accommodate his needs.

"What does the family think?"

"Grandpa is proud of you, as ever. As for the rest, well, we know the importance of mechs, but they think you're still too young to exert any meaningful influence on behalf of the Larkinsons."

Melinda's assessment rang true. Just because he became an apprentice did not mean he wielded a lot of personal influence. Master Olson had her own dignity. She wouldn't direct her attention to the small and weak Republic and start to meddle in their affairs.

After exchanging some small talk, Ves ended the call so Melinda could return to her duties. He made a final call to his broker.

Marcella Bollinger's stocky face stared at Ves with an intriguing expression. "You've made quite a leap. I didn't think you were capable of stealing the show at Leemar."

As a dealer of mechs, Marcella knew far more about mechs than the typical mech pilot. The Ves who designed the Marc Antony could never match up to the geniuses from Leemar. The sudden leap in strength was perplexing.

"I've recently come across a chance. I considerably improved my skills." Ves stated simply, deciding to leave Marcella guessing. "How is the demand for my designs?"

She adopted a greedy grin. "They've been barging at my door for days. While I suspect that much of the enthusiasm will die down over the week, you won't be lacking customers anymore. Your name recognition alone has broken through the roof."

Marcella sent Ves a marketing report that detailed his increased brand value. Even if he only fabricated two physical mechs, the value of his brand far surpassed the small-time mech manufacturers from Bentheim.

In fact, his value came close to matching the brand of a medium-sized mech manufacturer.

"The problem is that while your brand is bigger, your scale is still too small. What are your plans?"

"First, I intend to halt my sales. My Marc Antony variant is too outdated so I intend to update its design. You can expect a substantial improvements in its specs once I'm done."

"That's good. The Marc Antony's main selling point is that it's cheap. For an advanced mech, its performance falls woefully short. If you can close the gap to the most dominant models in the market, then I'm sure you'll attract a steady stream of orders."

Ves nodded in agreement. They both knew that the Marc Antony could never match the currentgen designs that maintained a stranglehold on the market. By increasing his variant's performance, they both hoped that his meteoric rise in fame was sufficient to divert a portion of the customer base.

"I've also revised my pricing and labelling scheme." Ves added as he sent over a single-page document outlining three distinct labels. "Since I'm planning to expand my workshop, I'll be handing off the fabrication to my employees. The mechs they make won't be as solid as my own, but I will make sure they will meet the specifications set by the design."

"This is your silver label, I see. A good choice of name. Silver is traditionally associated with valuable but affordable products. It fits well with your mass-market products. Your clients won't hold unrealistic expectations for your cheapest products."

"The next step up is the gold label. These are the mechs I've fabricated personally. As you know, I don't want to do this too often. Since my brand value has increased, I think a premium of fifty percent compared to the silver label is viable. Do you agree?"

Marcella hummed in thought. "This is a difficult question. I can do some market research for you, but it's better to implement it directly and see how many clients are willing to pay. I can see the appeal, but the price is very close to the maximum acceptable ceiling."

If Ves proved mistaken, they could always adjust the price. Marcella determined the final sale price in any case, so she only treated his suggestions as guidelines.

Her expression turned into a frown when she addressed the third label. "While the market will easily accept previous two labels, this ruby label of yours breaks the mold. Not only will you charge seventy-five percent above the base price, you also set the minimum order amount to four mechs. I don't know if you're aware, but we regularly offer discounts when clients order multiple mechs."

"I know that you're bewildered, but my ruby label is absolutely worth the price. It's an exclusive service meant to meet the needs of squads and close-knit mercenary corps. Just like what I've done for Vincent Ricklin, much of my time is spent on getting to know my clients and customizing my design to fit their profile. It's not worth it to go through all of that effort only to fabricate a single mech. By setting a minimum amount, I can make the most effective use of my time."

Left unspoken was that Ves wanted to develop his X-Factor. In the final round of the Leemar Open Competition, he became struck by how a handful of identical mechs strengthened each other's auras. He wanted to explore this phenomenon and turn it into a commercially viable benefit. If his speculations were true, his ruby label might turn into his biggest treasure.

"I'll put the word out, but don't expect any takers." Marcella replied with a hint of hesitation. "For now, you have to strike while the iron is hot. The market has a short-term memory. Before you fade away completely, you should find some way to solidify your reputation."

"I already plan to revise the Marc Antony. Once I've sold enough gold and silver labelled mechs, I intend to purchase an alloy compressor."

"Those things cost quite a bit of credits. You can get a second-hand one for about three-hundred million credits, but I don't recommend you take this route. Alloy compressors often deal with extreme pressures. They wear out faster than any other machine in a mech workshop."

"This is true, but the profit margin of the Marc Antony is too limited. There are two ways I can increase my earnings. First, I can expand my production scale. The problem with that is that it costs even more to do so. I'd rather take the second option and make a smaller upgrade to my workshop so that I can produce a higher quality mech."

"You want to design and sell a Caesar Augustus variant, right?"

"That's the only choice I have." Ves nodded his head. "I've advanced a lot, so I'm confident that I can tackle this design. I've already prepared the groundwork and have a new design ready in a couple of months."

The profit margin of Marc Antony paled in comparison to the Caesar Augustus. The faster Ves started to incorporate alloy compression in his

designs, the faster he'd accumulate enough credits to fund the development of a completely original design.

Marcella looked intrigued. She thought over his words before formulating a response. "You should build a track record first. Once you've proven that you can earn a steady income, you should apply for another loan in order to purchase a brand new alloy compressor."

"What?!" Ves rose up from his seat. "I still have to pay off my existing debt!"

"Your debt ceased to be a burden a long time ago. Tell me, how much effort do you have to make in order to pay off your annual interest payment?"

"I can cover the payment with a couple of sales."

"This means your business is underleveraged. Debt is not a scary monster, Ves. It is a tool that you can use to fund the rapid expansion you have always dreamed about. You don't have to be patient and slowly save up the required amount of credits. You can take a shortcut by maximizing your leverage."

"I own all the shares of my business. If I screw up, all the consequences are born solely by me."

"What's a bankruptcy or two among entrepreneurs? You're still young. And are you so insecure that you lack the confidence to take the next step? I thought you are a genius."

Marcella also had a point. Ves gained a lot of confidence recently. He had high hopes for his future earning potential. If he could successfully sway the bank in giving him a couple of hundred million credits, then he'd be able to accelerate his timetable by at least a year.

"I'll do it. I'll make an appointment with the bank once I return." Ves said with conviction. Even if the bank remained skeptical, Ves was not above using his status to apply some pressure.

As Ves closed the call with Marcella, he thought about what else he should be acquiring. The Caesar Augustus utilized an amazing armor system, one that required more than an alloy compressor in order to fabricate.

"I'll have to procure a chemical treatment machine as well. The armor plates have to be processed by a patented chemical formula first before they undergo compression. Without access to the CTM, I won't be able to insure the chemicals will penetrate the alloys."

Armor compressors could still be bought from the open market. As for the CTM, they were usually in the hands of the big boys. Getting ahold of one required good connections. Fortunately for Ves, the Clifford Society provided him with a channel. He found several stores in the Society's market that sold affordable CTMs.

"I just have to save up fifty merits."

Even as a Knight, Ves had to work for his merits. The most lucrative missions either tied him down for years or sent him straight into a battlefield. He had no stomach for either, so he waited patiently for other opportunities.

Ves learned that the Society's Mission Hall sometimes issued time-sensitive missions. Those who took the missions often had to handle difficult situations. The rewards were ample and the risks were manageable.

"Hopefully I can grab a suitable mission in the coming months."

Chapter 110: Cramming Session

Lucky playfully twisted his tail as he followed Ves into the lab. The Barracuda's lab bot finished analyzing Master Olson's present. Depending on the results, he'd either feed it to his cat or reserve it for another purpose.

When the lab bot presented the data, Ves looked intrigued for a moment. Disappointment set in right after. The miniaturized equipment of the lab

ultimately lacked the power to break the veil surrounding the ore. The lab bot ineptness also couldn't be helped.

"I know its size, mass, hardness, and other basic attributes. As for its composition, I still have no clue."

Unless Ves entrusted the ore to a materials science institute, he could get nothing else out of this piece of rock. It wasn't worth the hassle.

He turned his attention to Lucky, who sat next to Ves looking pleadingly at him. The cat even stretched his paws in a grabbing manner, as if it was a starving kitten.

"Are you sure this thing won't poison you or something?"

"Meow!"

"Then have at it!"

He nonchalantly threw the ore onto the floor. The chunk rolled a short distance before stopping. The gem cat pounced on the rock without mercy. Lucky gnawed at its surface with his alloy teeth, which surprisingly bounced off. The cat appeared indignant and employed his energy claws to break up the rock.

The claws only managed to scratch tiny chunks out of the rock. The resilience of Master Olson's ore was something else. Lucky's most powerful weapon easily sliced through exoskeleton armor had to admit defeat.

Lucky eagerly gobbled up the tiny chunks before beginning to slice again. Ves could tell his cat could take a while to digest the entire rock, so he left his cat to enjoy his buffet in peace and went back to work.

During the Barracuda's uneventful journey across the border of the Friday Coalition, the ship encountered nothing unusual. Perhaps no one had pursued them, or perhaps their strategy of travelling through uninhabited systems

worked. The Barracuda successfully evaded pursuit, if there was any in the first place.

Everyone relaxed after a few days. Dietrich finally had his fill of the bar and slowly explored the rest of the ship. Lucky kept slicing his new toy, swallowing piece after piece.

As for Ves, he started to work on improving his mathematics. He recognized that his poor math dragged his designs down. It might not have manifested during the competition due to its incredibly short time limits. When it came to regular designs, a good foundation in math could absolutely increase its optimization.

The key use of math was to create and adjust complicated models that could test out different design choices. For example, if he wanted to make a mech run faster, he could shave off armor from different spots. If he wanted to minimize the impact on the mech, he should lighten the area which would be least affected by the change.

How could he determine such a thing on his own? Up until now, he always used his judgement and intuition. For example, the chest was usually the most heavily protected portion of a mech. If he shaved off half a layer, it might not impact the mech a lot. In truth, he was merely guessing. He might think he only diminished the armor's effectiveness by five percent, when in reality it was ten percent.

Ves risked introducing a fatal flaw in his design if he was not aware of this discrepancy. The only way to make sure was to construct a mathematical model simulating the armor's performance. While the Mech Designer System came with a large amount of ready-made models, Ves ultimately didn't understand the essence of most of the math behind their complicated programming.

Using a model was like using a firearm. He only had to pull the trigger if he was content to shoot at someone. If he wanted to modify the firearm and achieve more penetration or a higher firing rate, then he had to thoroughly know the ins and outs.

Instead of using the System to forcefully upgrade his Mathematics skill, Ves tried to do the hard work himself. His mathematics remained at an incompetent level which was quite disgraceful. While it only took 500 DP to upgrade it to novice, Ves did not wish to waste the valuable points.

As his intelligence received a minor boost, Ves did not encounter too many roadblocks during his cramming sessions. He borrowed quite a few low-level textbooks from the Clifford Society's Star Library.

These bottom-level books were so worthless that the Society didn't bother with any elaborate security restrictions. As a Knight, Ves could directly study the content of the books inside the premises of the virtual library.

Ves made for a remarkable sight. A Knight not only stayed at the Star Library, but he was solving problems that others have mastered in their sleep. The Squires and Knights who visited the library couldn't help but pause at the sight of a solemn Knight cracking his head over basic college-level math.

"Haven't these people seen enough?" He complained inwardly as his cheeks grew hot.

He wanted to find a hole to burrow into. While the library offered to rent private rooms, Ves had to pay a merit in order to reserve one for a month.

Considering his stingy nature, he refused to waste his valuable merits again. He already regretted tossing a merit into the virtual fountain.

Despite the embarrassment, Ves quickly learned to tune out the distractions and focus on his studies. His progress picked up and he quickly devoured

every book he borrowed. In truth, Ves was capable of advancing his math long ago as he utilized a lot of elements already in his other skills.

His increased intelligence helped him in grasping new concepts. The content wasn't especially challenging, but there were hardly any shortcuts in improving his math. He had to study and master different kinds of math. His laser-focused concentration allowed him to persevere far longer than all but the most dedicated math fanatics.

All of that hard work eventually paid off. It took merely five days to raise his Mathematics skill from Incompetent to Novice, and another two weeks to raise it from Novice to Apprentice. Ves saved 1500 DP which he could use to buy something shiny. He studied his Status and confirmed that the System acknowledged his efforts.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 1223

Attributes

Strength: 0.8

Dexterity: 0.7

Endurance: 0.8

Intelligence: 1.3

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]: Apprentice

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

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression I]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

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

Abilities

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

Evaluation: An apprentice who has taken a step in the true world of mech design.

He also took note of his DP. His public efforts and Marcella's promotion caused his virtual mechs sales to spike up for a short time. Due to their low specs and primitive design, his sales hadn't reached a significant height, but the boost was welcome.

"If I have 2000 DP, I can upgrade my Mathematics skill to Journeyman. Once I reach that point, my overall ability to optimize my design will achieve a comprehensive transformation."

With a solid foundation in math, he wouldn't get lost when he used the System's more advanced mathematical models. With these tools in hand, his ability to correct hidden flaws in his design improved to a point where he could even be of assistance to more senior mech designers.

"Too bad it will take months for me to raise my skill level to journeyman. I also have to pay a lot of merits to borrow a decent book."

The value of a merit outweighed the value of DP. The former had to be earned through lots of effort or risk. The latter could be earned casually if he pumped out a couple of new designs.

"Hey System, if I update an existing design, will I earn any DP from its creation?"

[Any design that is similar to an existing design by the user will not reward any Design Points upon creation. This includes the act of improving an existing design. This limitation does not affect the Design Points granted through selling a design.]

The System's caustic words shut down the easiest way for Ves to earn a large amount of DP. Sure, he could update his designs in order to improve his running sales, but what was the point? Modelling his designs took a lot of time. He might as well design something new.

He made an exception for his Marc Antony design. As the only product of his workshop, Ves needed to make it as attractive as possible in order to lure over customers. When Ves last designed the Marc Antony, none of his skills reached journeyman. It could desperately use a tune-up.

"Still, it's a waste if I work on it now. I still need to bump my Mathematics to Journeyman-level and Physics to Apprentice-level."

That was the absolute minimum Ves had set. The Mark II version of his first commercial design should be a competitive product. If his improved Marc

Antony still felt too far behind, he'd be making a mockery out of his status as an Apprentice Mech Designer.

"I can't be as sloppy as those amateurs who are stuck at the Novice level."

With no solution in sight, Ves put the problem aside. He revisited the Star Library and started working on improving both his Physics and Electrical Engineering skills. By now, most of the Society members had gotten used to his cramming sessions.

Meanwhile, the Barracuda discretely made her way across the Komodo Star Sector. Past the central territories of the second-rate states, the amount of traffic vastly decreased. Most ships ignored this region due to the lack of wealth, development and exotic resources.

Occasionally, the spaceship detected light activity in the inner system. They usually turned out to be scouts or small-time mining outfits. No one bothered to station a significant force in these empty systems, so the Barracuda ignored the paltry presences.

As they were crossing the territory of yet another trivial third-rate state, the ship suddenly detected unusual activity. When Dietrich investigated the issue, he deemed it serious enough to interrupt Ves.

Irritated at being pulled away from his studies, Ves followed Dietrich to the bridge. "So what's the alarm?"

"The sensors detected the remains of a raid. Some secret base got invaded and destroyed." Dietrich explained as he summoned a projection compiled by the Barracuda's long ranged sensors. "Whoever attacked the base succeeded in wiping out the opposition. They obviously salvaged the fallen mechs, but they didn't take everything."

The ship detected signs of the battle on a mundane rocky planet. The boring planet was as dry as a bag of salt. It lacked both water and an atmosphere. Two tiny moons orbited around the planet at a fair distance.

Ves studied the exterior scans of this fallen base or outpost. It did not bear any insignia, which was usually mandated by galactic laws. This meant that the base was an illegal operation. Who built this base? Was it pirates? Shady mercenary gangs? An intelligence agency?

Ves failed to puzzle out the clues. As for his companion, he had a much better eye for battlefields.

"Both the attackers and the defenders tried to erase all of their marks. I can't be sure of my guesses." Dietrich stated upfront. "My instincts tell me this is a fight between two corporations."

That certainly came as a surprise. Any corporation usually preferred to avoid getting their hands dirty.

"Oh, I don't mean to say that their security departments went into action directly. This is likely the case of one corporation employing shady mercenaries attacking a hidden base protected by other mercenaries. The traces on the battlefield are a bit too varied on both sides. They both employed individualized mechs with their own unique loadouts."

Though not an ironclad rule, corporations and the military usually employed a uniform force of mechs with no more than a handful of different types.

Excessive individuality increased the amount of maintenance and complexity an organization had to deal with. Only a sloppy organization went into battle with dozens of different models.

"Do you have any indication on what this base was up to? This star system is quite desolate. There shouldn't be any exotics here. What company wanted to build a base so far out in the middle of nowhere?"

"Why not find out?" Dietrich grinned and cracked his neck. "I've been dying to make myself useful. Let's get close and explore the site. The battle should have ended at least a month ago, or else there wouldn't be so much erosion. It should be completely deserted."

Should they explore the fallen base? The notion excited him. What kind of treasures could he find from these abandoned ruins? Certainly, the attackers must have salvaged anything valuable, but if they were merely mercenaries, then they might have only reached out to the obvious. Depending on the purpose of the base, it might hold lots of specialized equipment that mech pilots might casually dismiss.

If the base turned out to be some kind of mech research facility, then he might even stumble upon an alloy compressor or a chemical treatment machine.

Greed almost overtook him before a note of caution doused his enthusiasm. Just because the invaders had left didn't mean the risks were gone. Who knows if the aggressors left behind a guard.

What Ves worried about the most is if either party came running with a quick-response ship if he tripped an alarm.

Was he contemplating adventure or disaster? Could he afford to take this risk when home was just a few leaps away?

"Let's do it. Navigator bot, please approach the designated planet carefully but maintain a low profile."

Dietrich already rubbed his hands. He loved treasure hunts like this. As for Ves, the only reason why he dared to approach the base was because he thought it was unlikely anyone had left a ship behind. What was the harm in taking a look?