

Chapter 131: Pre Production

Ves woke up with a slight headache the next morning. He started suffering from pain at the end of the project. He never spent so much time holding on to an inspiration, not to mention three at a time. He still suffered from the aftereffects of his exertion.

"It's worth it if I can obtain a C+ rating for my design." He muttered as he popped a pill inside his mouth to clear his head.

The medicine actually didn't help much, as if the pain originated from something other than a purely physical reaction. Nonetheless, Ves expected the strain to fade now that he had no need to concentrate for hours on end.

After finishing his morning ritual, he entered the workroom to see Carlos up at work. Yesterday, Ves checked in with Carlos and became satisfied with his progress. He mastered all of his 1-star and 2-star virtual designs. Only the Young Blood gave him a bit of trouble, but a success rate of 90% proved that he hadn't slacked off.

"How's your progress with the Marc Antony Mark II?"

"It's a lot better than the Mark I, that's for sure!" His employee responded with a chipper tone. "The internals are still a lot harder to assemble, but at least I don't have to be a plumber to untangle all of the messes!"

"That's good. I'll be relying on you to fabricate my silver label mechs. You should be able to thoroughly master the fabrication process by the end of the month."

"I don't have the confidence to achieve a success rate of 95%, but I should be able to get close to 90% in a month." Carlos honestly informed Ves. "There's only a couple of really tough spots that haven't been simplified. I think I'll need at least three months of practice to get over these bumps."

"That's fine. The Marc Antony Mark II is still a difficult design and you're still settling in your job. I'm making a lot of allowances for you, so you better shape up."

When Ves occasionally inspected the logs, he found out that Carlos religiously spent his evenings playing around with the designer software. As his boss, Ves naturally at his ambitious employee's work.

They were awful.

Despite having access to all of the licenses procured by Ves, Carlos treated them like a toddler playing with building blocks. All of his resulting designs looked like something out of a mad scientist's lab.

"Work hard, Carlos."

He left his minion alone and entered his own cubicle. He turned on his terminal and loaded up his finished design. The variant's pronounced shape and its intimidating black and red colors radiated an eagerness for battle. The golden frills and the dynamic vapor crest both gave the mech an aura of leadership.

In short, the Marc Antony Mark II aimed squarely at the middle segment of the mech market. Hopefully he already generated enough buzz to attract a couple of orders upon releasing the design.

Ves called Marcella now that his design was ready for sale. Her tired face popped up from the projection. "I haven't heard from you in a long time. Have you finally completed your work?"

"I finished my design."

For a moment, his mech broker thought she heard wrong. "Are you referring to your update to the Marc Antony?"

"I haven't been fooling around with any virtual designs. It's true. The Marc Antony Mark II is officially done."

"I've been dying to hear that! I already put the word out, you see. Once you release the specs, I'm sure I can make them bite."

When Ves sent over his design along with a detailed spec sheet, Marcella eagerly skimmed the documents. "Good! You've improved upon your mech's performance without raising costs. That's just what I needed!"

He could already imagine her diabolical plot. She'd pass off the Mark II as a more expensive design even if the fabrication costs hadn't budged. Ves didn't mind such plans, as a higher profit margin benefited him the most. With his current assets, he could forget about mass production.

"So what's our sales strategy?" Ves eagerly asked. "My production facilities have stayed idle for too many months. I'd like to end the standard year with some accomplishments under my belt."

"Hold your horses, Ves. While a product like yours is almost good enough to compete with the mainstream models, it's best to avoid widespread publicity for now."

"Why so? We previously introduced the Young Blood by holding an interview, and that worked alright."

"It's exactly due to your previous high profile release that we should take a gradual approach. You've already built up your name recognition. What you lack is a solid track record. If you want to present yourself as a competent mech designer, then you have to avoid the perception that you're showboating."

After a brief explanation, Ves understood his broker's arguments. Essentially, if he showed up in the news without offering something solid, the public might start treating him like a celebrity.

He could still benefit from such a status if Ves only harbored limited ambitions. Yet ever since he obtained the System, he set his sights on the pinnacle of mech design. If he wanted to be taken seriously, then he had to let his products do the talking.

"Alright, if you think it's best to keep a lower profile, then I'm fine with that. Do you have a plan?"

"I know you want to get your hands dirty, so let me ask you something. Can you fabricate a single mech without receiving an advance?"

"Right now?" Despite bleeding money lately, Ves still maintained a reserve of about twenty-eight million credits. "While I have the necessary funds, I'm not comfortable with dipping into my savings."

Marcella grinned at him. "It will be worth it. Didn't I mention that I built up some hype for your product? Let me gather a small circle of willing buyers and host a private party. You can make your case when we introduce your design."

"Is it all right for me to be present? I'm still rather young."

"Don't worry. As long as we demand outrageous prices, the market is willing to make allowances for your product. Even if the Mark II falls short in certain areas, there's nothing wrong with its price to performance ratio."

She had a point. Even as lastgen mechs started losing value, the Caesar Augustus still sold for sixty million credits. As for Ves, he could fabricate a single Mark II for eighteen million credits. That was pretty good for a variant that only performed 23% worse than its overpriced base model.

"We can auction off your first production as a limited edition model. We can build up a waiting list if we label the next couple of mechs as exclusive collector's edition models. The collectors will love it!"

"I'm not a fan of catering to this kind of crowd." Ves quickly replied. He detested those who treated mech as toys instead of war machines. "Let's just keep it simple. There's a reason why I've only established three different labels. I don't want to muddle up my catalog."

While he trusted Marcella to make the right choices, she always aimed to maximize profits. This time, Ves reined her in because he did not wish to go overboard. He also bowed out of the party.

"Are you sure you don't want to be present? Your presence will add a face to your design. Even if you fail to win them over this time, you can still cultivate some connections that might help you out in the long run."

"I'm not a marketing expert like you. My presence won't add too much to your party."

As Ves made it clear he disliked attending these sort of functions, Marcella agreed to host the party on her own as soon as Ves shipped his first mech."

After ending the call, he stretched his fingers and rubbed his head. "My headache is still lingering. Hopefully it will be gone by the time I start fabricating the first Mark II."

Ves reluctantly ordered a batch of materials from the MTA's open market for around 18 million credits. He noticed that he paid a little more this time for the same amount of goods.

"Prices have risen."

It made sense. Everyone smelled a war, so the manufacturers started running their production lines around the clock. The mech industry devoured more resources than before. This cut into the excess supply that the mining corporations routinely dumped in the open market.

The big manufacturers benefited from long-term supply contracts, so they had nothing to worry about. Only the little guys like Ves who had to resort to paying the full market price started feeling the pinch.

"If prices rise by a third, I won't be able to make a profit."

The upward trend in prices doused his enthusiasm. Ves suddenly realized his business was dangerously exposed to every fluctuation in the resource market.

"It's not worth it to engage in options right now. When my business grows, I'll expand my overhead and hire a financial wizard."

Right now, Ves wanted to fulfill a couple of important goals before the end of the standard year. The Larkinsons always returned to their ancestral home in Rittersberg to celebrate the new year.

Of course, most of the Larkinsons who served in the military were unable to ask for leave in these tumultuous times. Ves expected this year's gathering to be a more subdued affair.

"It will be good if I can prove my worth. Grandfather and the other elders don't care about virtual mechs."

The older generation still looked down on Ves. They disapproved of his foray into the highly competitive mech industry. None of them lent him a hand when he founded his mech workshop. Only his father believed in his dream.

"I don't blame the old goats. While I've benefited a lot from my father's help at the start, I only got to this point through my own hard work. I'm not like those other designers who only managed to stay afloat with outside money."

This was a particular point of pride for Ves. As long as he sold a couple more mechs, he could show off his substantial cash flow to his relatives and earn their respect.

"Let's start practicing."

Ves logged into his designer account in Iron Spirit and entered its virtual workshop. In the three days it took the transports to deliver his latest order of materials to his backyard, he attempted to complete a virtual copy of his new design.

The virtual workshop's excellent facilities substantially increased his precision. His increased proficiency in both the 3D printer and assembly system also boosted his capabilities. Both factors insured he created a flawless mech in less than two days.

Once he received his shipments, he sought to duplicate his success in the real universe. He slowed down his pace and carefully double-checked his actions due to using inferior second-hand machines. Ves grew increasingly frustrated at being shackled by his outdated 3D printer and assembler.

"If I successfully reconstruct the Dortmund, then I won't have to worry about replacing it for a very long time. Good assembly systems are a lot cheaper to buy, though ones that can match a Dortmund in quality will still cost more than a billion credits."

Unlike an industrial printer, an assembly system never lost its value over time if properly maintained. They merely required occasional firmware updates in order to keep up with the latest techniques. More expensive assemblers worked faster and more precise. Heavy mechs required extremely robust assemblers in order to lift its various parts in place.

In any case, Ves encountered plenty of tight spots but he resolved without issue. He worked as conservative as possible and took five days to complete the mech. The Mark II's revamped internal architecture allowed Ves to keep up his pace as he purposely eliminated the knots that confounded him in the previous version.

The fabrication process ended when the assembler finished applying coating to the entire frame. Ves looked up at his creation while holding Lucky and smiled.

"It's almost perfect. I only need to climb inside the cockpit to install a golden label and a gem."

Still, Ves had the feeling that his model lacked something essential. Something that stamped the machine as his own personal creation. When he compared his freshly fabricated mech to other models, he quickly realized what it lacked.

It was time for him to design a logo for his brand.

Ves looked down at Lucky and scratched his head. "What do you say about lending your likeness to my logo?"

The mechanical cat meowed, more in response to his scratches than his question.

"I'll be sure to stylize the symbol. I don't know if your product series actually exists in the galaxy. The last thing I want is to step on someone's copyright."

Frankly, Ves hardly believed another copy of Lucky existed in the galaxy. His Gem Excretion skill alone defied his understanding of the universe.

Chapter 132 Viable Mech

In the end, Ves took a few hours to draft his logo. While his artwork might not satisfy any critics, it looked sufficiently distinct. It looked like a curling bronze cat resting atop a cartoonish rainbow cloud. Ves had to admit the design lacked the traditional kind of maturity that most serious arms manufacturers favored.

"I hope you don't mind lending your likeness to my brand."

Lucky continued to paw at the projection of his finished work.

He uploaded the design to the assembler system and allowed it to paint over his newly designed logo to the mech's left chest. Ves took a major step in his career now that he implemented a logo.

As the coating finally set, Ves stepped on a platform that hovered up to the cockpit. He entered its luxurious interior and sat down on the seat. He studied the reliefs he carved to the sides and at the top. If anyone paid close attention, then they'd realize that they told three separate stories.

Ves took a deep breath. "It smells good here. Nothing beats the smell of a newborn mech."

Once he got over his infatuation, Ves installed the final parts of his design. He first attached the golden plate to the underside of the central console.

CA-1C2 MARC ANTONY MARK II

DESIGNED SOLELY BY VES LARKINSON

HAND-FABRICATED SOLELY BY VES LARKINSON

MADE IN THE BRIGHT REPUBLIC

PRODUCTION #1

The plate looked nearly identical to the one inside Captain Caruther's mech. This was his first do-over of a design after fabricating only two copies. Ves found it a sad state of affairs to update a design after achieving so few sales.

"The Mark I is officially history now. How times fly."

He installed one of Lucky's gem before he exited the cockpit. Before he set it in its place, he first retrieved his System-bought Anonymizer Stamp. After applying the exclusive ink, he carefully stamped a brilliant piece of honey-like citrine.

In order to make sure the stamp actually did what the System claimed, he took out his handheld multiscanner. After carefully subjecting the gem to a host of scans, the machine stubbornly insisted that Ves held nothing but a shiny rock.

"Huh. It works. As expected of the System."

The Mech Designer System might be greedy and capricious, but it never lied. Ves focused on the citrine, and after a few seconds of focusing, the description showed up in his view.

[Citrine of Warmth]

Increases the safe heat capacity of a mech by 2% when installed.

Ves retrieved the gem a couple of weeks ago. The yellow gem was part of Lucky's post-transformation droppings. His recent upgrade and the premium minerals he enjoyed both caused the quality of his gems to quadruple.

After scanning his mech to make sure he hadn't missed any faults, Ves arranged it to be shipped. First, he sent it to the MTA to be certified. Once they confirmed that Ves hadn't screwed up, the mech would be sent to a heavy-duty transport ship to be brought to Bentheim.

As Ves watched a heavy shuttle take off from his workshop, he let out a breath. "Five days is a little long to fabricate a single mech. If I want to be efficient, I should be able to complete a mech in three days."

Due to the learning curve, the production process always started off slow and unsteady. Once Ves got used to the design and prepared responses to the most common problems, he could easily fabricate the Mark II as fast as he had done in the game.

He hoped to reach that point by the time he publically announced the design. For now, Ves intended to make inroads into another project. He entered his

secure storage and approached the boxes of salvaged Dortmund printer parts.

Lucky followed him inside and curiously pawed at the content of the boxes. Ves wasn't worried the cat would do something naughty. An open container of minerals rested on the other side of the room. Once the cat sated his curiosity, he'd sprint over to his favorite box of food and start to nibble on some chunks.

"I've been very hasty in collecting all of parts. I should sort them out and check for lingering damage."

Previously, Ves only scanned the broken Dortmund and the strewn out parts in a superficial manner. Now that he had access to his entire workshop, he intended to use a full-sized scanner from his assembly system. A small host of lifting bots opened up the boxes and spread out the parts onto the floor of the spacious storage room.

After cataloging every piece of alloy or composite, the bots brought the parts to the assembly system. There, the inbuilt scanning system thoroughly mapped the objects as they went by and alerted Ves to any imperfections.

Only 1 in 500 parts showed signs of irregularities. Ves wrote off the suspicious parts without hesitation. He put them into a mid-sized container and send them to a recycling facility to be broken down to their base components.

Since he had to remake the components, he might as well use the materials he had on hand. Some of the exotics incorporated in the sophisticated machine could not even be found in the open market.

Still, Ves did not entirely trust his scanners. They worked fine when measuring the exterior but some materials were so dense that the scanners failed to penetrate past a couple of millimeters.

Besides borrowing the MTA's state-of-the-art machines, Ves decided to use something else. He carefully retrieved an archaic looking lantern from a

locked compartment. He received the mystical object from some random draw rewarded by the System. He inspected it carefully.

[Lantern of Imperfection]

Light the lantern and shine it against a mech or component to reveal structural flaws. The revealed flaws are only visible to the holder of the lantern. The lamp contains enough oil to burn for five hours.

"System, will the lantern work if I shine it on something other than a mech?"

[The Lantern of Imperfection is meant to uncover flaws that hinder the performance of mechs. Any component that is not directly related to a mech will not be illuminated by the lantern's light.]

"How does the lantern judge whether a component is 'directly related' to mechs? A 3D printer is responsible for fabricating models. Is that direct enough?"

[Only components that are part of an existing design are eligible in the perspective of the Lantern of Imperfection.]

Ves did not let the System's stubbornness sway him from using the lantern. He noted that the system phrased the lantern's rule in a fairly broad manner. Engineers like him often learned to bend seemingly immutable rules to their advantage.

"As long as I incorporate the printer parts into a mech design, the lantern will consider them eligible, right?"

[...]

"Hahahaha! I'm right!" He laughed. "If it's merely programmed to treat components in this fashion, then I'll just slap something together."

The lantern's distinction didn't make any sense in the first place. An artificial distinction between mech and non-mech components could only have been

imposed from an external force. Since the lantern was not a living object, Ves easily figured out a way to exploit its lack of cunning.

Once the assembler system finished scanning and sorting all of the parts, Ves imported the detailed data into his designer software.

"Time to design the ugliest mech in the galaxy."

He suspected that only viable design played a role when deciding to illuminate a component. This meant that Ves had to put some effort into making sure his Frankenstein monster could actually walk and shoot.

"The Dortmund weighs as much as two heavy mechs. It will take a lot of effort keeping such a massive monstrosity on its feet."

Replacing the feet with wheels or treads didn't work, as Ves had to stick to the definition of a mech. Since he didn't have to actually fabricate the mech, Ves choose to start from the default Caesar Augustus frame since it used the best materials.

First, he stripped the limbs and expanded the torso. He added a crude hollow section to the underside and filled it up with redundant power reactors and engines. He then duplicated the default legs by about a dozen times before adding them to the expanded portion. It took a few hours to rig the artificial muscles that transferred motive power from the engines to the legs.

The mech so far looked like an oversized centaur/spider hybrid with a wheelbarrow-like hollow at its rear. He started to build an elaborate lattice around the mech and gradually started to attach the lighter Dortmund parts to them. They hung from the lattices like leaves on a tree.

Once Ves used up all of the small-scale parts, he started to using up the heavier components. He welded them together and stacked them up inside the hollow he left out. It made the monster mech look like an old-fashioned truck with legs.

To top off his mech, he added a single laser cannon to a random surface. He quickly finalized the design and handed it over to the System.

"Here's my latest design. I call it the Piece of Junk on Twelve Legs."

[Design Evaluation: Piece of Junk on Twelve Legs]

Model name: Piece of Junk on Twelve Legs

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson

Weight Classification: Ultra-heavy

Recommended Role: Target Practice

Armor: F-

Carrying Capacity: A

Aesthetics: F-

Endurance: F-

Energy Efficiency: F-

Flexibility: F-

Firepower: F+

Integrity: F-

Mobility: F-

Spotting: F-

X-Factor: F

Cost efficiency: F-

Project involvement: 100%

Original component composition: 3%

Overall evaluation: The Piece of Junk on Twelve Legs barely meets the definition of a mech. This walking disaster fails in every possible role except for holding up its own prodigious weight.

[You have received no Design Points for failing to design a practical mech.]

The System must have been having a seizure when it marked his design. Ves had to suppress his grin. The Piece of Junk could barely move, let alone stand in place without collapsing in on itself. Still, as long as it held up for a minute, he succeeded in making a viable mech.

Ves returned to the sorted pile of printer parts and brought out the lantern. After carefully igniting the wick, the lantern released a brilliant golden glow that nearly blinded him for a moment.

The brightness dimmed into a gentle glow. Whenever the orange light encountered one of the components laying on the ground, it flared and sought to sink in deep. Ves merely held up the lantern and waited for something to happen.

He spotted a couple of signs ten minutes later. Part of a large alloy sheet started glowing red. They looked like tiny hairline fractures. Their presence proved that he successfully fooled the lantern's programming.

"This is great!"

With the help of the lantern, Ves took out any remaining parts that glowed suspiciously. If he neglected the lantern, he might have gone ahead and pieced together a Dortmund that could one day collapse in a heap of junk. He practically saved his own hide with this precautionary move.

In the end, Ves had to recycle around 1 in 200 parts. This was much more than he expected. The prevalence of microfractures and other faults forced him to halt his current schedule. He wanted to make some headway in the

reconstruction project before he started fulfilling orders for the Marc II, but now it appeared he underestimated the required steps.

"I can replace most of the parts at home, but these high-grade processors are a different matter. Luckily, I picked up plenty of spares."

Out of the many sets of chips, Ves found only a couple of them still remained pristine. While he gathered an entire set of functional chips, their security measures probably blocked them from establishing a connection with each other. Their serial numbers and individual settings didn't match.

"I'll have to find someone who can hack these chips." He concluded. Due to the questionable legality of his current project, he couldn't just walk into the MTA or something. Besides resorting to the black market, Ves could only think of the Clifford Society to ask for help.

"I don't have a lot of merits left." He winced. "I might need to complete a short mission before I can afford a hacker."

Before that, he also needed to clean house. The latest shenanigans from the Greens and the White Doves prompted Ves to request a meeting with the Pioneers. Calsie recently sent him a message that she successfully arranged a meeting with an important member of the Pioneers.

"Looks like I'll be heading to downtown Freslin tomorrow. Do you want to come with me Lucky?"

The gem cat continued to munch on his crunchy dinner.

Chapter 133 Chamomile Tea

Ves took a seat at table in an upscale teahouse. The urban noise of downtown Freslin made its way through the open window by his side. Lucky lazily sat down on the windowsill, staring out at the harmless birds and critters darting about between the neatly planted trees.

Minutes later, Calsie climbed the stairs of the oriental establishment. This time she brought a guest with her. The older gentlemen by her side looked like a bureaucrat that never transitioned into the upper ranks. He also appeared to be rather frazzled.

"Mr. Larkinson, it's good to finally meet you." The old man greeted Ves while offering his hand. "The name's Linden Royce. I'm the Deputy Director of Stakeholder Relations of the Initiative for Pioneering."

Mr. Royce basically schmoozed with every businessman or official who expressed interest in the Pioneers. Though Ves preferred to speak with his boss, beggars couldn't be choosers.

"You can call me Ves."

"That's fine, just call me Linden."

"Before we get to business, let's order some tea, shall we?"

Ves ordered a pot of fragrant chamomile tea. It was his mother's favorite tea. The smell of it brought happy memories of a simpler time to his mind. A fleeting smile appeared on his face before a bump from Lucky brought him back to the present.

"That's a remarkable looking cat you've got there. Did you obtain it from the Carnegie Group?"

"No, I had him for a while. Lucky here is an exclusive creation from an inventor from the New Rubarth Empire.."

In truth, Ves had no idea where the gem cat originally emerged. The young man merely name-dropped the notorious first-rate superstate in order to impress the deputy director. While Linden possessed enough self-control to keep his expression polite, a discrete bump from Lucky surreptitiously informed Ves of the man's excitement.

After a minute of enjoying their tea, they finally decided to talk shop.

"I've been hearing a lot about you from Calsie lately." Linden gestured at the young woman sitting next to Ves. "She informed me that you have expressed interest in forging a closer relationship with the Initiative for Pioneering. While we welcome each and every citizen from Cloudy Curtain, I'd like to hear your own motivations for seeking us out."

Ves already prepared an answer. "My mech business is about to enter a rapid growth trajectory. The amount of credits and publicity that my business is about to generate can lead to an irrational response. I recently realized the importance of paying attention to politics. Compared to the hostile attitudes of the White Doves and the Greens, the Pioneers are the only people in town that doesn't treat businessmen like scum."

"I understand where you are coming from, Ves. While Cloudy Curtain might appear to be a sleepy planet where nothing happens, the truth is that the Greens and White Doves are waging a daily war against the people. They are constantly advancing their heartless agendas in the Planetary Assembly."

"They have made their opinions of me very clear. While they have laid low for now, I don't doubt they are cooking something up to make it impossible for me to run my business in my home planet."

Linden nodded and poured another cup of chamomile tea from the pot. "There are signs that the their coalition is about to advance a tax reform bill in the Assembly in order to address the persistent budget deficits. From what we've heard, the bill is proposing to raise taxes on arms manufacturing and heavy industry to up to 50%."

"What?!" Ves almost spilled his tea. "Fifty percent is even higher than Bentheim's rate! The tax hikes won't fill up the holes in the annual budget at all. Instead, it will drive away every entrepreneur with a working brain. Without

a healthy presence of business and commerce, Cloudy Curtain will slide further into backwardness."

"For a political neophyte, you are very astute in your predictions."

Ves couldn't help that his increased intelligence dredged up what he learned in business class. "Anyone can figure out the situation if they followed the news. Even if our planet's development doesn't matter to me, the tax rates still affect my business directly. It's impossible for me to make a living with such a murderous tax rate hanging over my head!"

Linden expressed his sympathies for Ves and elaborated on his own thoughts. "Our planet has been settled for several hundred years, but what have we done since then? Our population has remained stagnant at only twenty million while vast swathes of land remain unused."

"I'm familiar with the facts. Our population growth has remained stagnant because our best and brightest always emigrate to better pastures."

After a brief discussion about the backwardness of their home planet, Linden finally cut to the chase.

"It is great to hear your thoughts. We truly think alike." The old man complimented before adopting a stern face. "Unfortunately, due to political concerns, it is not convenient for us to accept you into our fold."

The refusal surprised Ves. After all, they had much in common. "Is there a problem?"

"There is. We've recently come across evidence that you have been keeping company with a rather unsavory element in our society."

"Walter's Whalers."

"Exactly." This time, Linden's expression changed into a frown. "Perhaps you are not aware of the customs. That can be forgiven. Nevertheless, you should

know that interacting with such gangs will only bring you momentary benefits. The Whalers will inevitably fall and be displaced by another gang. Your fate as a collaborator might also not be good."

"It is not your business to judge my relationship with the Whalers. They are the only power on this planet besides the MTA with a substantial mech force. As a mech designer and mech manufacturer, it is a given that we enter a mutually beneficial relationship."

Walter's Whalers might be uncouth bastards, but they treated Ves with respect.

"Mr. Larkinson, I believe you are severely underestimating the risks involved with associating with the Whalers. Your opponents are aware of your relations and are afraid that you will take advantage of it. In fact, the Greens and the White Doves have already made some preparations if the situation devolves into open conflict."

"That is quite a warning you gave me." Ves replied as he tried to figure out the deputy director's goal. "It is a pity that my bond with the Whalers is solid. It's impossible for me to break my relations with them, especially since they are the only friends I have who I can trust to lend a hand if my workshop is in danger."

The worth of a mech workshop on their home planet trumped all other considerations. A genuine mech designer offered a lot of possible services to the Whalers, such as customizing their mechs or designing custom ones that fit their personal needs.

Eventually, Linden backed down from his insistence and instead retrieved a secure data pad from his suit. He turned it on and placed it on the table next to the tea pot.

"What's this?" Ves asked as he grabbed the pad and scrolled through the contents. From what he saw, the pad contained a lot of documents and survey data of a couple of remote farms situated near the equator of the planet.

Linden clasped his hands and smirked. "Did you know that the Greens and the White Doves are the inheritors of the original pacifists who colonized our planet? They used to own the majority shares of the colony back when it was still a private business venture. They chose to settle on this planet because it offers the ideal environment to cultivate their own brand of luxury crops."

"So they're the ones behind the massive cloud rice farms? No wonder the Planetary Assembly favors agriculture so much. The Greens and the Doves are only interested in lining their own pockets."

One of the most famous products Cloudy Curtain developed was a genetically modified type of highly nutritious rice. The seeds originated from the New Rubarth Empire, and ever since the founders of the Bright Republic settled in the Komodo Star Sector, they tried and failed to cultivate this notoriously sensitive crop.

Only after another round of modification could the crops be tentatively grown in Cloudy Curtain's temperate and stable climate. The two consortiums that grew and sold the puffy, delicious and nutritious rice branded it as cloud rice. It was the planet's number one export, eclipsing many other specialty crops.

When Ves stumbled upon a giant hole in the survey data, he stopped. "Is there something special in the Colmes region?"

"The Raleigh Consortium and the Luvon Consortium are the sole farming concerns with the rights to cultivate cloud rice. The Raleighs favor the Greens while the Luvons are funding the White Doves. They used to be one big family before they suddenly split a mere decade after settling the planet."

"You're not answering my question." Ves complained. "What does this have to do with the survey data and the Colmes region?"

"I am trying to provide you with some essential context, my friend, but very well, let's skip the history lesson. All you need to know is that despite their common roots, the Raleighs and Luvons are also rivals who are locked in a subtle struggle for dominance."

"So you could say that the Consortiums and the groups that they are backing are frenemies."

"That is quite an apt description." Linden nodded. "Thus, you can imagine our surprise when we found out that the company that operates in the restricted Colmes region is actually a joint venture between the two Consortiums."

That raised an eyebrow from Ves. For the two political and economic rivals to cooperate on a farming venture of all things indicated that the region hid something important.

Ves looked at the earliest historical survey maps and noted that the Colmes region centered around a dormant volcano. The area around this volcano must be an exceptionally fertile plot of land.

"So what are you getting at?"

"Don't you see? The Colmes region is of vital importance to the two Consortiums. It might very well be the reason why their ancestors colonized this planet in the first place."

The news that the original pacifists might have settled on a barren planet like Cloudy Curtain due to a single fertile plot roused his interest. The farming Consortiums must be cultivating something much more valuable than cloud rice.

"This is interesting and all, but why are you telling me this? I am merely a mech designer. The farming sector has nothing to do with me."

"Perhaps you are correct, but consider the situation. Walter's Whalers routinely extort the local businesses. They even claim a cut from the incredible profitable export cloud rice. What do you suppose might happen if some of their mechs decided to stroll into the Colmes region?"

Lucky stopped the swish of his tail and stared at Linden with a focused intensity. Ves quickly stroked his back in order to forestall any aggression.

"Mr. Royce, you've given me a very dangerous suggestion. Is there some reason why you've mentioned it to me instead of acting on your own intelligence?"

The deputy director shrugged. "What can I say? The Pioneers are not an armed gang of thugs. We don't have the habit of acting like a bunch of hooligans with mechs. More importantly, the Whalers are a remarkably cohesive group. Say what you will about Mr. Walter, but he has a natural talent for leadership. It is impossible for any of us to engage in a dialog with their cadre due to their disdain for politicians."

"You could leave an anonymous tip."

"They might not act on the information if it comes from a suspicious source."

Ves rapped his fingers against the table and considered the situation. The Pioneers refused to let him join their little club due to his undeniable connections to a mercenary gang. Then they passed him a request to leverage those same connections to deliver a punch to the most important supporters of their political rivals.

Ves didn't need Lucky to tell him that the deputy director reeked of hypocrisy. "I'm certain an incident will benefit the Pioneers."

Linden gave him a smile. "What's good for the Pioneers will also be shared to allies such as you. When the Greens and the White Doves are thrown in disarray, we can forestall the pending tax reform bill that's currently under consideration."

"What if nothing happens at the Colmes region? Will you let the bill go through?"

"We can delay the procedures, but we can't prevent them from passing the bill. If the Greens and the White Doves retain their political momentum, then our Assemblymen have no choice but to compromise with the ruling coalition. I imagine they will bargain their support for the bill if they can obtain an exemption for our key businesses."

Naturally, the Pioneers would obviously leave out his mech workshop in that list. "Let me think about it. A delicate matter like this should not be decided over a cup of tea. Can I keep this data pad?"

"Feel free to keep it or show it around to your friends." Linden waved his hand and stood up. "I'm certain that it will make for interesting reading to anyone with an interest in farming."

The deputy director chuckled as he left the teahouse.

Chapter 134 Status Quo

Ves turned his gaze towards Calsie, who kept her mouth shut throughout the entire conversation.

"I did not expect this meeting to turn out this way."

"Sorry, Ves! I really thought they'd welcome you with open arms."

"It's not your fault. The Pioneers have a point. It's too unseemly to approach the Pioneers when I'm already cozying up to Walter's Whalers."

If he had to make a choice, then he'd pick the thugs with mechs over politicians who schemed against their own mothers. The conversation with Linden Royce thoroughly disillusioned Ves to politics.

"What do you suggest I do?"

To her credit, Calsie did not immediately shill for the Pioneers. "No matter what you decide, you should assume that any incidents will be traced back to you. It's not a good idea to antagonize any influence."

That was nice of her to say, but Ves couldn't afford to sit around and let the tax reform bill be signed into law. If the Pioneers treated him with sincerity, then Ves did not mind inducing Dietrich and his friends to poke around the Colmes region. Instead, Director Linden came to him with a false mask and a vague offer of reciprocity that may not even be fulfilled.

"What do you think about the deputy director, Lucky? Is he a good person?"

The gem cat hissed and kept his posture low. After Lucky leveled up, his intelligence received a substantial boost. Ves found out that Lucky became very proficient in reading other people's body language. Even if the cat did not understand what people said, Lucky could still determine whether a person lied.

According to Lucky's current posture, Director Linden harbored suspicious intentions. Ves tried to figure out what the Pioneers really wanted.

The Colmes region farms might hide something incredible, of that Ves did not doubt. Yet what could they gain if another supercrop got exposed?

If Pioneers only wanted to use him, then Ves could imagine the sequence of events. Not only would an incident expose the Consortium's secret project, it could also spark an open conflict between the ruling coalition and the gang.

Such a fight might not be as one-sided as everyone thought. As the descendents of the original settlers, the Raleighs and Luvons must have spent a fortune entrenching their strategic assets.

No matter who won, only the Pioneers stood ready to receive the benefits.

Ves closed his eyes and tried to calm his mind. The last thing he needed was to make an impulsive decision.

First, he established his goal. "I want to operate my business without excessive interference from bureaucrats and politicians who have a bone to pick with me."

The Greens and the White Doves were obviously hostile to him. The Pioneers could best be described as a neutral bystander who is looking to pick up a bargain. They obviously had no intention of giving Ves a hand without getting something in return.

Why did he have to enter this murky swamp and be forced to make deals with politicians? Calsie, who still sat silently by his side, spoke up at that moment.

"Mr. Larkinson, the problem that you are facing is coming from two fronts. First, your presence is clashing against the domestic interests of the White Doves and to a lesser extent the Greens. Perhaps on a good day the Greens can be bought off, but the Doves are intrinsically opposed to you."

"Yes, I know that."

"Then you should be aware that they normally don't move so quick with trying to push a tax reform bill through the Assembly. What you should really be focusing on is trying to stop the source of the latest initiatives."

Ves buried his face in one of his hands. "You mean the power behind the scenes. If it's a power from the Coalition, then it's a group I can touch."

"Perhaps not alone, but don't you have a big shot at Leemar behind your back? Why don't you ring her up and ask her to take care of whoever is trying to ruin your day?"

His political advisor had a point. He obviously couldn't fight back against the foreign influence. As long as they remained, they could instigate many possible groups to turn against him. He wouldn't put it past them to make a deal with the Pioneers.

Ves hated the thought of giving up and crying to Horatio for help. When he stayed at Leemar, Ves got the impression that they prized independence. Even if the deck was stacked against him, a mech designer should always be resourceful enough to find a solution on his own.

He failed. Despite his recent fame, his actual power amounted next to nothing. If Ves still happened to be a regular mech designer without any backing, his enemies might have already wiped him out.

"Calsie."

"Yes?"

"Please prepare all the evidence you've gathered about the foreign influence that is meddling behind the scenes. It doesn't matter if you've only heard rumors, just include all of them in a single report. Be as accurate as possible and don't try to embellish the information in any way. Can you do that for me?"

"Ah, no problem sir. I'll get right to it once I return to my apartment."

The girl quickly left the teahouse while Ves finished his last cup of tea. He stroked Lucky's back as he lamented his helplessness in the face of absolute power. Ves needed to find a way to close the power gap.

"In the end, I'm still too young. I've only started designing mechs a half year ago. That's not enough time for me to accumulate a lot of wealth and influence."

The Mech Designer System fueled his perverse growth. This allowed him to skip many inconveniences such as procuring his starting production licences. The downside to this was that he lacked the time to build up a solid network of friends and backers who he could trust.

He shook his head. "It's out of my hands now."

Ves left the teahouse and brought Lucky back to his workshop. After a day of waiting, Calsie sent him a collection of files that detailed her investigation. He took the files and logged into the Clifford Society's virtual portal.

He didn't bother descending down to the mountain range. Instead, he placed a call to Horatio and asked if he could come to the Society for a talk.

Master Olson's assistant appeared in front of Ves in a flash. "Good day Ves. From your tone, you seem to be in a spot of trouble. Tell me what is bothering you."

"It's like this." He started to explain his circumstances while handing over Calsie's report. Ves made sure to mention that while he did not manage to obtain any solid proof, the instigators likely possessed more power than he could handle by himself.

Horatio pursed his lips and gave Ves a measuring look. "It will take some time to corroborate your findings. I can tell you right now that we will step in if it turns out someone from the Coalition is targeting you. There are certain rules that Coalition partners have to abide to. It's bad news for everyone if someone breaks the rules."

"Maybe the instigators are hoping they can take advantage of the galaxy-wide unrest."

"That is a foolish decision. Our resources aren't strained to the point where we can neglect the safety of our fellow mech designers. Don't forget that you have been chosen by Carmin to inherit some of her legacy."

After Horatio finished giving him some assurances, he disappeared in a wink. Ves stretched his arms and looked down upon the mountain range like a god. The illusion of looking down upon the material world buoyed his spirits a little.

"One day, I will float among the clouds and own all that is within my grasp."

He exited the Society and resumed tinkering with the Dortmund parts. He carefully cleaned and polished some of the more worn out parts and brought them to their prime condition. Once the recyclers sent back the salvaged materials, Ves could proceed to supplement the missing parts.

"The processors are still a huge problem. I'm not a cyber specialist. Unless I divert lots of DP into bringing up my cyber skills, I'll have to hire someone else to do the job."

Three days later, Horatio called him on his comm. After putting up his Privacy Shield, he accepted the call.

"You were correct to bring this matter to our attention." Horatio started, and sent him back some files that detailed their own findings. "The Gauge Dynasty recklessly extended their reach within our sphere of influence. The haste in their actions made it obvious that it was not a sanctioned operation."

Ves skimmed over the documents and recognized the most prominent name. "I knew it! That bastard Carter never let me out of his sights!"

He remembered how the most dominant mech designer in the entire competition lost in a humiliating fashion. Carter's assigned pilot completely dominated Lovejoy's swordsman mech with a ridiculous flying heavy mech. Instead of going for the kill, the enemy pilot showed off, leaving his mech open

to a desperate sword throw that eventually brought the lumbering machine down.

"There's no cause for worry, Ves. Carmin has personally rebuked the Dynasty and forced them to withdraw their agents in your Republic. Our own agents are still keeping watch on you. A Master has to maintain their dignity. So long as you remain Carmin's apprentice, we will not allow her enemies to lay a hand on you."

Ves took note of Horatio's careful wording. "So you won't be taken care of my domestic opposition then. I'm still in a pickle even if you've put the wind out of the sails."

"A mech designer who remains vulnerable to the whims of others is not worth investing in. Prove your own value by showing us your resilience."

"What if I don't make it?"

"You are hardly facing a life-threatening crisis. No one has forced you to base your startup on a rural planet with a government that is hostile to arms manufacturing. At worst, they'll just drive you away. Isn't there a nearby port system with a healthy mech industry? Perhaps you should consider moving early."

The discussion ended after Horatio finished admonishing Ves. His senior did not hold back in questioning the junior's decisions. Ves had to admit that Horatio had a point. He basically disrupted Cloudy Curtain's status quo by starting up a mech business on a peaceful planet. That didn't mean that Ves was ready to throw in the towel.

"Bentheim is too much of a snake pit. Without any reliable backing, all the gangs, cartels and ruthless competitors will gobble me up. At least I have Dietrich will pick up my calls if I remain on this planet."

Though Ves appreciated Horatio's help, he still believed he made the right choices. He always dreamed about growing his business into a major mech manufacturer from the home planet of his father.

After going through Horatio's intelligence documents, Ves picked a couple of pages and sent them on to Calsie. He followed up with a short message telling her to come up with a plan to stop the tax reform bill from passing in the Assembly. Hopefully she could come up with something smarter than taking Director Royce's offer of instigating an incident at the mysterious Colmes region.

"Even if the Consortiums are cooking something up, it's none of my business."

He should really be focusing on his upcoming projects. Ves expected a call from Marcella any time now. In the meantime, he resumed polishing the Dortmund parts.

If Ves wanted to obtain more power, then he had to expand his capabilities. Restoring an industrial printer to full readiness vastly increased his production scale. If he supplemented his expansion with a compressor and a CTM, he'd be able to run two production lines around the clock.

"The money will really start rolling in if I can get to that point."

That was difficult. Not only did he have to procure a couple of expensive machines, he also had to expand his workforce and train another fabricator. Not to mention that he relied on Marcella to keep the orders coming.

"The Mark II I fabricated last week should already be unveiled today." Ves recalled as he looked at the calendar. "I wonder how her private gathering will go."

Chapter 135 Showcase

Colonel Ares Huntington was an old friend of Marcella Bollinger. They came from the same crowd, and while a war wound forcibly put an end to her

piloting career, Ares hung on for twenty more years until his age caught up. Nowadays he fought behind a desk.

"You've got them wrapped around your finger." Ares casually spoke to Marcella.

They both stood on a ramp overlooking an empty training ground. A handful of men waited their turn to pilot the Marc Antony Mark II. A couple of other guests impatiently hopped in the simulator pods in order to experience the virtual version of the novel mech.

It couldn't be helped. The first unveiling of the Mark II proceeded in a dramatic fashion as Marcella brought the guests inside a darkened stable and slowly revealed the mech. Its iconic red vapor crest lighted up first. Other lights revealed its masculine contours which included its heavy shield and its shoulder launchers.

Marcella knew her crowd. The Mark II explicitly appealed to the primal part of a human male. Most of her guests were men. The only women present either specialized in piloting knights or represented wealthy individuals who couldn't come in person.

"Ves has come a long way." Marcella said to her old friend. "I always knew the Larkinson family had a talent with mechs. Even if Ves lacked the aptitude, the love for mechs is buried within his bones."

Ares snorted at Marcella's fawning tone. "Don't pretend you spotted his talent back then. The Larkinson name is overrated. You merely took him on as a client because he got bamboozled into signing that ridiculous ten-year contract."

"Heh, you're only grumbling because Ark Larkinson stole your posting. Now he's stationed at the border to the Vesians while you are stuck reading data pads in Bentheim."

"He's too young to command an entire base! I don't care if he's been promoted to colonel, he doesn't have the experience to lead the vanguard!"

The incident still rankled Ares. He possessed all the right qualifications to be stationed at an important conflict zone, but some golden boy a dozen years short his age snatched his promised posting. Technically, Ares received a higher-ranking posting, but for a veteran of the previous Bright-Vesia War it might as well be death by torture.

Marcella shook her head while rubbing her camouflaged artificial limbs.

"You're always chomping at the bit to smash their noses. I bet HQ passed you on because you're a little too eager to start the war early."

"I'm a professional! I don't let my personal feelings get in the way of duty."

The argument went nowhere so Marcella shut her mouth. Instead, both of them watched the lumbering Mark II navigate the obstacle course and defeat a handful of flimsy projections of mechs.

"So what do you think about little Vessie's latest work?"

The colonel scratched his white-bearded chin as he evaluated the performance of the mech. "There's something funny about this model. I can't quite tell what's going on. Whatever it is, it made your guests turn into instant fans."

The mech broker cleverly prefaced the first ten minutes of the gathering with teases and snippets of simulated combat footage. They all highlighted the as-of-yet unannounced mech in its best light. The heavy tower shield, the versatile missile launchers, the deadly short-ranged laser cannons, they all combined to present an image of indomitability in the face of overwhelming forces.

Of course, Marcella conveniently left out the Mark II's less than flattering features, such as its mass production quality armor system and its flash-in-the-pan endurance.

"If you want to know what's special about the Mark II, then go watch the duels over there."

The projections that showed the virtual Mark II's in action conveyed every duel and battle scenario in visceral detail.

At one side, a pair of Mark II's stood side-by-side leading the charge against an enemy fortified position. The hybrid knights used their heavy shields as disposable cover, trading protection for distance. Their shoulder launchers occasionally fired missiles that exploded in a cloud of smoke and sensor-blocking particles.

Another projection displayed a tense and even duel. A blue-striped Mark II tried to run circles around a green-striped Mark II and fired back with its wrist lasers. The defending mech easily blocked them with its shield and retaliated by firing a full salvo of homing missiles.

While the other mech defended against the sudden barrage, the green-striped mech closed the distance and bashed its shield against its counterpart. The sudden disruption of balance left the blue-striped mech vulnerable to an incoming chop. The lack of momentum caused the sword to leave only a shallow wound that hardly impacted the stricken mech's performance.

The anticipation grew among those who waited their turns. While they had all seen better mechs, most of them came with exorbitant price tags.

"This baby is more responsive than the Caesar Augustus!"

"That's natural. The CA-1 is two decades old."

"As long as the price is right, I don't mind ordering one for my son. It's a great mech for the younger generation to let out some steam."

"Careful with that. The armor of this variant is not as good as the original model. At least the cockpit's ejection system is still just as good."

Marcella didn't even had to steer the conversation directly. Her usual style of setting props to influence the mood generated an organic discussion about the Mark II's many merits.

She turned to the only guest who hadn't become entranced. "So, will you consider purchasing a model or two?"

"Not a chance!" Ares huffed. "The Larkinson boy is too wet behind the ears to design a mech that can withstand the rigors of a genuine war. The only reason I'm here is because I'm assigned to the Domestic Designer Support Program."

As a remote, third-rate state, the Bright Republic often had a hard time keeping grasp on its talents. Most of their most capable mech designers studied abroad at institutions like Leemar. Once they graduated, the majority became enamored with living in a sophisticated second-rate state and never returned to the poor and underdeveloped Republic.

The Mech Corps instituted the Support Program in order to keep their talents at home.

"Perhaps you should do your job for once. From what I've gathered, most of the participants of the Fusion Cup have already left the Republic."

The Support Program failed to attract the latest generation of promising mech designers. While it was too much to hope that Edwin McKinney would stick around, even second-tier talents like Michael Dumont and Patricia Schneider had left the Republic.

"What about the boy? When can we expect his departure?"

"He's a Larkinson." Marcella declared. "Every Larkinson I've met are unwaveringly loyal to the Republic. Vessie is no different from his family."

The colonel reluctantly nodded. "I'll give you that, but he's still too young to play a role. If the boy started his career a few years earlier, I might be convinced to lend him a hand. Right now he can't compete against the Journeymen we're already keeping an eye on."

"So you'd rather prepare for the war today than invest in the future." Marcella summed up the Program's current priority. "I can't say I blame you, but you're missing a prime opportunity to build a relationship with a future star. Anyone who caught the attention of a master will surely soar to greater heights."

"I've seen a lot of kids rise up like rockets travelling up the sky. Most of them fell after running out of juice."

Instead of continuing the argument, the two turned back to the crowd.

Everyone gained a decent impression of the Mark II, including its flaws. The lack of compressed armor put a limit to the application of the mech. The model's limited operating time put a lot of constraints.

Despite the reality check, everyone who personally piloted the physical model praised its excellent handling. Such a quality couldn't be expressed in numbers, so the gathering of guests eventually divided into two. Those who missed out wondered whether they misjudged the Mark II.

Marcella cleverly ended the trials at that point and proceeded to hold an auction immediately afterwards. She purposefully timed the auction when their curiosity reached its height. This led to a feverish round of bidding by competing collectors.

Most of them eyed the first production run of the Mark II as an investment. They did their homework on Ves. If the young man one day became a Senior or Master Mech Designer, the value of the first ever Marc Antony Mark II might balloon to ten or twenty times its current value.

Thus, a feverish round of bidding followed until a logistics magnate bagged the mech for a whopping 42 million credits.

Many collectors applauded the profligate fellow even as they thought he spent too much. The hobbyists and professionals among the crowd collected lots of mechs in order to increase the odds of a lucky strike. As long as they controlled their spending, they stood to make a handsome profit.

After the collectors had their fill of the auction, Marcella began to peddle the model in earnest. She offered an exclusive price of 32 million credits for a gold label mech, which deterred many of the guests. The mech broker ignored the doubters and worked to lock down orders from the small crowd who fell in love with the Mark II.

She pursued a deliberate strategy of maximizing the gold label's profit margin. Ves already told her that he lacked the time to fabricate a large number of gold label mechs. Marcella limited the maximum demand for the product by quoting a price

The relatively high price also set a psychological floor to the model's expected value. When Marcella eventually unveiled the silver label model, she could still make a handsome profit even if she charged a couple of million credits less. She expected to earn a lot more revenue by selling lots of silver label mechs.

Ares approached Marcella once she finished taking orders. Her assistants already approached her customers in order to hammer out the details.

According to the contract she signed with Ves, she was allowed to offer additional option such as insurance or repair services. They represented a

major source of revenue to Marcella because she didn't have to share the earnings with Ves. It was one of the many ways she sneaked an additional benefit past her inexperienced partner.

"How many suckers have you reeled in?"

"Eight, which is quite a good haul. After all, Ves is not even a year into his career. Convincing eight adults to fork over their money for an untested product isn't easy."

"I suppose your marketing tricks have nothing to do with it, right?" Ares cheekily pointed out. "Whatever, I've got a shuttle to catch and another meeting to attend. I wish you both the best of luck."

"Thanks Ares!"

A lot of guests already started leaving now that the party had ended. Marcella stuck around to supervise the immediate handover of the first production mech. Both the model and the client deserved special attention. She kept a vigilant eye to the proceedings.

Marcella tallied her earning at the end of the day. She made over sixty million credits from her cut alone. She earned an additional twenty million from the services she pushed.

After subtracting her expenses, she still retained a third of the total sum. Compared to her other commissions, she called herself lucky if she managed to hold on to a fifth of her earnings.

"The good times are about to start." She whispered to herself.

More than anyone else, Marcella looked forward to the outbreak of war. As a veteran, experienced the horrors of a protracted conflict. The wars between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom usually amounted to a long and arduous battle of attrition.

Mech brokers like Marcella happened to love these lengthy and destructive wars. More battles meant more attrition. More attrition meant a greater demand for mechs. Even if the Mech Corps drafted the majority of Marcella's suppliers like, she still expected the demand for ready-made mechs to soar.

Chapter 136 Convoy Service

When Ves finally heard back from Marcella, he turned to Lucky who rested on the couch.

"Am I hearing this right?"

Lucky batted his paw at him for disturbing his naptime. The lazy cat hadn't bothered to give his opinion. As long as the minerals kept coming, the animal was content.

His bank sent him a notification a few minutes later. Ves truly had to admit his broker kept her promises. His first production mech auctioned for an incredible sum of 42 million credits. This amounted to a gross profits of 15.6 million credits. Such a profit from a single sale was truly perverse.

He quickly received confirmation from the System as well by depositing 42 DP into his stagnant pool. It was a drop in the ocean compared to the earnings of his latest virtual mech, but every little bit helped.

What amazed Ves even more was that Marcella managed to draw out eight subsequent orders at the same event. Due to a lack of capital, he demanded his clients to pay a deposit up front in order to afford the resources required to fabricate the mechs. With such an onerous requirement, Marcella still managed to open the wallets of eight different people.

Ves glanced at the list of customers. Six of them were registered as mercenaries while only two appeared to be collectors. This meant that his mechs would certainly be employed in battle. A solid track record helped much to enhance the value of his Mark II.

After he finally came down from his excitement, Ves prepared his largest set of orders to date. First, he had to procure around 144 million credits worth of raw materials. If anything happened to this huge batch of resources, he might as well declare bankruptcy.

"I'll have to start looking for insurance." He quickly decided.

A quick search revealed that Sanyal-Ablin happened to be one of the major insurance vendors on the planet. They not only insured bulk transport shipments, they also offered an armed convoy service for especially valuable shipments. Anyone who contracted the convoy service naturally received a generous insurance quote.

Since he already contracted SASS to secure his workshop, he might as well inquire about their insurance policies. Ves called Robyn's comm. She picked up after two minutes of waiting.

"Sorry about that Mr. Larkinson, I had to finalize a business deal. How may I help you?"

"I'm about to receive a huge shipment of materials." He started, then explained his upcoming schedule.

Miss Robyn quickly got the picture. "I see. You have come to the right place to secure your shipments. Let me explain our products."

SASS offered various insurance policies. The cheapest policy only insured a fixed number of shipments, which was great for short-term business ventures. It also added up to a significant amount of money if renewed.

Those who wanted to insure their interstellar shipments for the long haul contracted their annual policies. Ves favored this kind of service because Ves only had to pay a fixed amount per year for a certain amount of shipments. If the amount or value of his shipment exceeded a certain threshold, the

insurance policy automatically adjusted its annual rate. It made for a convenient and predictable expense.

"We highly recommend you combine our annual insurance with our convoy service." The woman added. "Shipments throughout the Republic has suffered from a marked increase in pirate attacks. Major mech shipments have become their prime targets."

He furrowed his brows. That sounded really bad news to Ves, especially since he frequently shipped his goods back and forth.

"How does it look like and what will it cost?"

"Our security company runs a network of armed convoys throughout the entire Republic. Combined with an annual insurance policy, Your business will be able to benefit from our convoy service at a preferential rate of ten million credits a year. This rate will only apply as long as the total market value of your shipments is lower than a billion credits a year."

Ves did a quick search on the galactic net. Prices for convoy services diverged quite a bit, but SASS enjoyed a good reputation. They charged twice as much and the costs ramped up faster if the trade volume increased, but their impeccable safety record was a testament on how they took their shipments seriously.

"Our regular convoy service from Cloudy Curtain to Bentheim and back runs a fixed schedule of eight days per circuit. Among our customers are the famous Raleigh and Luvon Consortiums. They entrust their valuable shipments of Cloud Rice and other luxury crops to our secure convoys. We have never let any of their shipments go astray."

"My shipments will join their convoy if I sign up?"

"That will likely be the case." Robyn nodded. "Considering the nature of your business, it will be sufficient to tack on an extra transport to the existing

convoy whenever you send or receive a large number of goods. Smaller shipments such as a single mech can be squeezed in the cargo hold of a regular grain transport."

After a round of discussion, Ves decided to sign up for their combined insurance and convoy service package. He had to cough up another 10 million credits in exchange for some piece of mind. Robyn actually complimented him for signing on before the company raised its prices due to the increasing frequency of pirate attacks.

To be honest, Ves did not fear any pirate attacks. Cloudy Curtain was just a small hop away from Bentheim and thus somewhat fell under the port system's sphere of influence. Any pirate captain that decided to hijack a transport in this area might as well commit suicide.

Instead, he wanted to guard against sabotage. The recent troubles with the local politicians as well as the Gauge Dynasty warned him that it was best to take precautions. Even though the convoy service deducted twice as much as his annual interest payment, Ves deemed it worth the cost if he could push all responsibility onto Sanyal-Ablin.

"A ruined shipment won't hurt me very much. SASS will reimburse me for any losses their convoy incurs."

His overhead costs had increased again, but Ves considered all of them a necessary price for doing business in this day and age.

Once he signed the contract and supplied the necessary paperwork, SASS granted him access to a virtual site that allowed him to register his shipments.

Ves immediately made use of the service by ordering 144 million credits worth of raw materials and routed it all through Sanyal-Ablin's fixed convoy schedule. The next wave of convoys departed about two days later, giving Ves about five days of preparation.

"Carlos!" He called after finishing his arrangements.

"Yes boss?"

"What's your current success rate for the Mark II?"

"I'm still getting stuck on a couple of tight spots. I've been making strides, but I won't be able to master the fabrication process until the end of the month."

As the designer of the Mark II, Ves knew where Carlos struggled with the process. His employee had tentatively mastered the printing process, which impressed him quite a bit.

Ves even considered letting Carlos take charge of the 3D printer, but quickly pushed the notion aside. A gold label mech deserved his full attention in order to strengthen its X-Factor as much as possible.

"Tell you what. I've received a substantial amount of orders for the Mark II. Five days later, I'll start fabricating eight of them in sequence. You can accompany me when I start to work, but you can only watch and ask questions. Is that alright with you?"

The chance to see Ves in action should be a golden opportunity for Carlos. His employee eagerly nodded. "Thank you! That's just what I need! I'll be sure not to bother you!"

In the meantime, Ves prepared his workshop for the upcoming fabrication run. He preconfigured his assembly machines with optimizations that sped up their processes and reduced the risk factors.

He also corresponded with Calsie about the tax reform bill and any other possible threats. According to the student, the Greens retracted their support for its immediate passage. The White Doves were forced to follow suit. For now, the Planetary Assembly bounced the bill back to a committee that

intended to submit a modified version of the bill at the start of the next standard year.

"Looks like the abrupt departure of the Gauge Dynasty has thrown the ruling coalition into disarray." Ves noted with glee. He turned back to Calsie. "Have you made any headway in your plan to sink this bill?"

"I'm pursuing a couple of potential prospects. I'm currently in talks with a handful of interested parties. Once I've received their assent, I'll unveil my plan to you."

It sounded kind of vague, but Ves gave the woman a chance. "Alright, you can take your time as long as you have something solid."

Once he ended the call, he called up his agenda. If Ves wanted to attend the annual new year celebration with the Larkinsons, he had to speed up his fabrication run.

"I can only afford to spend four days to complete each mech." He calculated after running the numbers. "I also have to take the travel time into account."

He could save a lot of time if he repaired the Barracuda. However, Ves already blew a large portion of his savings. His remaining liquid funds still fell short of covering the cost of repairs. He shrugged and went back to his preparations.

Five days later, the convoy from SASS touched down on Cloudy Curtain's spaceport. A swarm of smaller cargo shuttles transferred over two-thousand tons of goods to his workshop. Ves patted himself on his back for expanding the perimeter of his workshop. If not for his foresight, he might have run out of room.

Unfortunately, his secure storage room lacked the space to accommodate the entire shipment. Ves only stored the most valuable exotics while he left the bulk materials in their original containers.

Once his hauler bots brought the first set of materials to his 3D printer, Ves summoned Carlos to his side. "This is it, Carlos. I'll be demonstrating the fabrication process to you. If you can't figure out the methods to tackle those tight spots you mentioned, then you can go back to Bentheim."

"Don't worry boss, I'll be paying a lot of attention. Can I record your work?"

"I'd rather not." Ves immediately replied. Though SASS constantly monitored him through their security systems, he wished to minimize the risk of exposing the X-Factor. "Watch with your mind, not with your eyes. Don't try to memorize my routines through rote learning. You're going to have an awful time if you don't understand the underlying thoughts of my actions."

Carlos nodded as he appeared to understand the point. "So I should be asking questions instead?"

"That's right, but don't disturb me while I'm at work. I'd hate to ruin a batch worth millions of credits if you happen to pull me out of my zone."

As Ves intended to go back to focusing on three different images at once, he quickly came up with an excuse. "Whenever I fabricate, I easily get sucked into my work. It's fine as long as you don't bump into me. I'll be taking regular breaks between my hour-long fabrication sessions. Feel free to ask your questions during my pauses."

"Understood. Before you start, can you tell me if you intend to fabricate the mechs one by one or by batch?"

"Each gold label mech is an individual creation. They deserve to be treated as a single entity instead of an assembly line product." Ves quickly made up in order to cover the fact that he needed to fabricate them one-by-one in order to maximize their X-Factor. "While it's not as efficient, the method ensures that each mech is a good fit for my customers."

"Will I be obliged to do the same if I start doing my job?"

"It's not necessary for you to take the same approach." Ves answered after considering the amount of mechs Carlos might fabricate one day. "That said, in the long run, I think it will greatly benefit your results if you learn to adopt the same mindset."

Once Carlos finished asking his questions, Ves began to focus his mind. He summoned the three inspirations and sharpened them into a combined intent. He successfully formed the unique mental imprint that was intrinsic to his Mark II design.

"Let's begin."

Chapter 137 Teaching

Ves already possessed enough skills and experience to fabricate a flawless mech in six days. In order to compress the fabrication time to four days, he had to drop his excessive caution. He stopped double-checking and triple-checking most of his routine work and only slowed down when he reached a difficult phase.

His previous experience along with his ample preparations smoothed out his efforts to speed up his work. He already formulated standard set of responses to any problems he'd likely be facing.

"Watch carefully now." Ves instructed his attentive employee. "The fabrication of mech components is usually the most challenging portion of the fabrication process. The Mark Antony Mark II and the Caesar Augustus it's based upon are anomalies because their assembly phases are hellishly difficult. That does not reduce the difficulty of printing the parts."

Carlos raised his hand. "I can't help but notice that you haven't stockpiled a lot of spare materials. Are you that confident you won't slip up?"

"I am. As my own design, I'm perfectly aware of my limits. It's not too challenging for me to fabricate my design without any faults. I hope you can reach this point in the future."

Actually, Ves intended to build a stockpile of commonly-used resources once he finished the current production run. While he still had millions of credits to spare, he preferred to leave his savings alone unless an emergency came up.

"Alright, I'll be starting now. I have devote my complete attention to my work, so don't bump into me or anything."

Working with an audience took some time for Ves to get used to. He behaved a bit more self-consciously, which led to a couple of slip-ups. Fortunately, he managed to recover quickly and limit the damage.

Every hour, Ves took a break to relax his mind. This was where Carlos finally came into being by asking a lot of questions. His employee brimmed with questions that overflowed as soon as Ves took a break.

"Why do you slow down at that part..."

"What is the purpose of..."

"Can you tell me why you..."

Answering the questions was oddly beneficial to Ves. Before, he always worked alone, so he always internalized his approach. Now that Carlos kept digging into his methods, Ves had to package them into an existing theoretical framework and explain them using logic instead of intuition.

It provided Ves with the opportunity to revise his own choices. It also allowed him to address his shortcomings when he came up short. He couldn't simply say that he chose to apply a solution because of his gut feeling. He also declined to mention that he drew a lot of his knowledge from the skills that the System directly implanted into his brain.

Thus, when Ves answered the questions in a seriously, he gained a lot of insights into his own habits. He gained a new appreciation for teaching now that he benefited from it as much as his pupil.

The fabrication of components went without a hitch, though he took half a day extra to complete the process. He didn't expect to devote so much time explaining his methods.

Another variable that extended his breaks was that Lucky started to nag for attention. He constant shop talk and focused work left Ves with little time to play with his gem cat. The little bugger started to feel neglected, so he often dropped by when Ves put down his work.

"That's a really smart AI." Carlos complimented him when he noticed that Lucky never disrupted Ves when he was operating the machines. "I wish I had one. Where did you buy this model?"

"I didn't buy him. He's a present from my dad. I think he got it from the New Rubarth Empire, but I'm not sure. He's fairly unique I think so don't expect to get a pet as good as this one."

The cat cheekily yowled at Carlos before he went back to hugging Ves. It was as if the cat showed off its intelligence before it went back to claiming his owner's lap.

Lucky also regularly patrolled the grounds. Even if SASS already did a great job in securing the premises of his workshop, the cat still sniffed around as if he owned the place.

In the meantime, work continued. Once he finished fabricating all of the parts, Ves started assembling them into a single machine. The start of it went easy. Even Carlos could put together the internal frame and the core components without a single slip-up.

The problem began when Ves reached the stage where he had to build up the internals. Even if he completely revised the architecture, the complexity of using three different weapon systems as well as large-sized components left little space for anything else. It required a delicate touch in order to squeeze some parts in the right places.

Nonetheless, Ves managed to thread the needle again and again. It helped that he already removed the most problematic needles, leaving only those with wide enough openings.

Even Carlos appeared impressed. "The way you work the controls are so smooth. You're not only precise, but you're fast as well. I can watch you repeat that phase a hundred times and I still won't get bored."

"That's the benefit to designing your own mech. You can build it up in a way that suits your skills. The goal of designing your mech should be to maximize the performance while minimizing its complexity. Often times, you have to make a decision between the two. The more capable mech designers are still able to cope with the complexity that's necessary to elevate their designs."

"So an inexperienced mech designer like me could still design a variant like yours, right?"

"Yes, but you'll need a really good fabricator to turn your design into a reality." Ves shook his head. "It's best not to go beyond your means. A design that is too complex for you to fabricate will likely include a lot of design flaws that aren't obvious at first glance."

Ves worked a little more briskly this time but failed to keep up with his schedule. He completed the assembly another half day late, which meant that it took about five days to fabricate his second gold-label mech.

"This really won't do. I need to work faster."

Hence, Ves forced his employee to curb his curiosity and only ask a single question per break. This helped a lot by the time he started fabricating the second mech. He worked more briskly now that Carlos spent most of his time observing. Most of the pertinent questions had been answered already anyway.

Time flowed like water down the stream. Ves fell into a routine where he discarded almost all of his distractions and focused solely on completing his mechs.

Even his interactions with Carlos changed into something of a routine. He gained so much practice in splitting his mind that he could actually hold a conversation with a third of his mind. The realization didn't sink in to Ves at the time.

While the first model still incorporated a couple of minor flaws, the second one looked much better. By the time he fabricated the third mech, Ves managed to suppress all of the recurring flaws. Anomalies continued to happen, but Ves was able to address them as they occurred. His mastery of the Mark II improved by leaps and bounds.

"Something has to be said for repetition." Ves noted one day after he completed the fifth model. "It doesn't matter how smart you are or how many books you've read. Getting your hands dirty is the best way to round up your ability."

Some mech designers believed that they should specialize in drafting up designs. They never bothered to fabricate a mech in person. Perhaps they were forced to do so during their studies, but as soon as they got loose they never touched a fabrication machine for the rest of their lives.

Mostly affluent designers subscribed to that philosophy. They considered the fabrication process to be beneath their status. They cheerfully left the job to their minions while they already started cooking up their next designs.

In contrast, poor blokes like Carlos had to work beneath their station in order to make a living. While he certainly benefited from mastering the fabrication process, it only offered a single perspective. If Carlos ever wanted to advance his career, he had to supplement his learning on his own.

Many tried and failed to excel because they lacked the resources and opportunities to compete against those who enjoyed a head-start. That was something Carlos also knew deep down in his heart.

As Ves tackled the remaining orders, he started getting headaches again. The pain slowly escalated, causing him to hurry up and rush his production.

Fortunately, Carlos satisfied his curiosity by the time Ves built up his seventh mech. He stopped asking questions and merely watched on as Ves worked his magic.

The last three mechs rolled off the assembler without a hitch. Ves fulfilled all eight orders with only one day behind schedule. He easily managed to hit his goal of taking four days to fulfill an order. If not for the headaches, he might have only taken three days to complete a mech.

"Ugh. A human isn't supposed to split his mind all day." He muttered as he sunk down on his couch, unaware that he almost bumped into a dozing Lucky. "Oops, sorry about that buddy."

The cat hissed at him and slinked away to find a safer spot to settle down. Ves scratched his head and thought it was almost time for Lucky to deposit another gem in his litterbox.

"Remember, don't do your bathroom business without me!"

He always made sure to erect the privacy shield when Lucky excreted another gem. Perhaps the security monitors from SASS thought he had a weird fetish for accompanying his gem cat's bathroom breaks, but Ves didn't care. He eagerly intended to elevate his mechs with Lucky's special gems.

That reminded Ves of an unpleasant fact. It cost at least 100 DP to mark a gem with his anonymizing stamp. If he only had to stamp once, then he could easily bear the cost. If he had to stamp eight mechs at a time, then his stagnant DP suddenly received a stagnant reduction.

He could choose not to use his gems, but that did not sit well with Ves. It was a waste to ignore Lucky's utility. The cat might also start to grow grumpy if he thought that Ves treated his gems like garbage.

Eight mechs stood in a row. All of them gleamed in the lights with their shiny coating and intimidating bulk. Every Mark II also sported the distinctive logo of a stylized cat lounging upon a rainbow cloud enclosed by a V. Seeing all of them together side-by-side hammered home to Ves that he had finally become a true mech manufacturer.

"Gosh. You're incredible, you know that?" Carlos complimented as he became entranced by the sight. "It's too bad these mechs are destined to split up. I can't imagine how awesome it would be if all eight of these mechs are deployed as a single squad."

This was the first time Ves put eight identical mechs together. The X-Factor that emanated from each of them melded together in a single entity that almost came alive. The amplified waves affected Carlos even if he couldn't put his feelings into words.

"It's a shame indeed." Ves replied. He wished he could keep the mechs in place and study the effects in greater detail. "In the end, we don't own these mechs. As much as we'd like to treat our creations as our own, we have to

keep in mind that others have already paid for it. Mechs can only be treated right if they fulfill their purpose."

With that in mind, Ves calmly initiated the hand-off procedure for all eight mechs. He first sent them to the MTA for certification. Since he personally fabricated each of the models with sufficient care, they should be able to pass the inspections. He therefore scheduled enough slots for eight packaged mechs in the next convoy to Bentheim.

"Five days later, the mechs should arrive at Bentheim. Marcella can take over from there."

He immediately booked a first-class ticket on a reputable passenger liner to the capital system of the Republic. Though Ves wanted to wait and receive his payment for delivering the mechs, he had to leave immediately if he wanted to attend the annual Larkinson gathering in Rittersberg.

Before he departed for his trip, Ves made some arrangements for his absence. He first instructed Carlos to continue to practice his fabrication skills. Ves expected his employee to start earning his keep by the time the new year dawned.

"Don't worry Ves. You've given me a lot of answers. I've got a solid direction on how to improve."

Even Carlos felt bad for spending his first months under Ves as a freeloader. He eagerly wished to prove his worth and start earning his paycheck.

As for Calsie, she still worked on a plan. Ves merely informed her to keep him updated as he left for Rittersberg. He wanted to know the instant the ruling coalition wanted to take advantage of his absence by pulling a stunt.

"You don't have to worry about that, boss. The Planetary Assembly and the City Council are both in recess. Even politicians have to go home to accompany their families."

"Huh. You could have fooled me. Am I wrong to assume that most of them are bastards?"

"Well..." Calsie trailed off. "A lot of influential people are hosting parties at this time of year. It's the perfect opportunity to mingle with the rich and powerful."

"Figures. Just keep an eye on the Big Three and track who they are talking to. I'm curious to know who among the locals are supporting their shenanigans."

"Will do!"

After tidying up his workshop, he sent a brief message to Marcella that he was taking a break. While Ves liked to meet with her face to face, his flight schedule was already tight.

"Hopefully she'll be placated by the plans I have in store."

Chapter 138 Freedom Fighter

Vincent Ricklin did not suffer fools gladly. Sadly, encountered many fools in the cause he had shackled to. If the rebel had anything kind to say about the Bentheim Liberation Movement, it was that at least a third of them believed in the cause.

The remainder consisted of a mix between disgruntled pirates looking for a thrill and foreign provocateurs wishing to destabilize the Republic.

He did not have a beef with either of them. Vincent pretty much turned into a pirate himself when he vaporized half the elders of his family. Also, the foreign agents from the Vesia Kingdom and elsewhere generously bankrolled their entire operation.

This meant that Vincent should be able to get along with everyone in the Movement. The reality proved otherwise.

The separatists wanted to fight the Mech Corps directly, which was suicide. No matter how well-funded, a group of rebels could never match up against the might of a proper army.

The pirates wanted to keep hitting soft targets. Their bloodthirsty instincts pushed them to ever-greater acts of **** and pillage, the opposite of how a rebel group ought to behave.

As for the foreign agents, they barely managed to rein in the worst of the group by threatening to cut off the money. For all their smarts and secrets, they barely knew how to

From this motley crew of bandits and rebels, Vincent only trusted his old butler. Johnson stood by his side, armed and armored like he meant it. The former wastrel found Johnson's deathly presence to be an effective deterrent against the more lawless types in the crew.

"When they told me the BLM actually stood a chance of freeing Bentheim from the Republic, I never believed the spy for a second."

His elder butler concurred. "The port system is a strategic asset. If the Bentheim System actually manages cast off the Republic's yoke, the Kingdom will simply step in afterwards."

Thereby adding a third port system to their considerable territory. Such a drastic change fundamentally affected the power balance in the region. The Vesians didn't even have to conquer the rest of the Republic. They could simply starve the remote systems into submission by cutting off access to cheap and convenient trade.

Not that Vincent cared about any sides. He always reminded to himself that he worked for himself. The BLM provided him with an escape route from his slowly worsening status with the Ricklins. Now that they served their purpose, Vincent increasingly inched towards the exit.

Not that General Vasil or Agent Orian ever let him out of their sights. The leader of the resistance movement along with the head liaison from the Vesians both invited Vincent for a meeting. The young man navigated the crudely tunneled corridors of the movement's asteroid base and entered a conference room, or whatever passed as one.

Compared to the stellar interior of the Ricklins, the current room left much to be desired. Empty crates served as their seats while an empty stack of mech-sized magazines acted as their table.

"Can't you whip up something better?" Vincent questioned with an exasperated tone. "We've been staying here for months. You don't even need a printer. Just let one of the boys whip something up with a welder and some scrap."

The great military general of closed his eyes in ecstasy as he injected his veins with a smuggled stimulant. "Our means are not much. This ain't your old daddy's operation where you can shower everyone with money. We are barely keeping up our maintenance."

"Enough. Let's not waste Mr. Ricklin's time." Agent Orian interrupted as he looked up from his work at disassembling a faulty spy drone. "Vincent, we've called you here because we have a major operation in store."

"You're cooking something other than a mindless killing spree?"

"Every act has a purpose. The constant terror bombings has succeeded in frightening the Republic. It has made them retract their defenses just the way we like it. In fact, their feeble response directly enables us to proceed with the operation we have in store."

Just as the agent was about to enumerate their goals, an alarm engulfed the entire base. The loud sirens and red flashing lights interrupted everyone rebel in the giant asteroid base.

The general gestured with his palm, cutting off the alarm. Vasil summoned up a projection of the asteroid base and its perimeter. A large amount of large red dots surrounded the base. This didn't alarm him as much as a section of the asteroid itself beginning to take on a crimson color.

"We've been infiltrated!" The general roared and slammed his fist against the top of his makeshift table. "They've already launched a regiment of mechs at sector gamma and established a beachhead! They're splitting our mechs from our ships!"

Their asteroid base mainly guarded against sabotage. With the kind of crew they were running, the possibility that a drunk pilot might one day go crazy and shoot everything in sight was a distinct possibility. Therefore, the base placed the mech stables at the opposite side of the ship bay.

Which meant that none of the mechs could escape so long as the Hellhounds blocked the passages in between.

More intelligence started to stream in once the invaders stopped hiding. "It's the 3rd Infernal Hellhounds!"

Everyone's faces soured even further. The Third was one of the most stubborn and scrappiest regiments of the 2nd Bentheim Division. They embodied the principle of eschewing complicated tricks and schemes in favor of charging over and punching mechs in the face. For them to end up in the middle of their base was a disaster.

"The ship bay is holding on for now. Our exterior defensive grid has finally been brought online. No one will be able to approach our base for now. We can hold for an hour, maybe two."

Fixed defenses such as turrets and autonomous defense bots could never hold out for long against a large force of mechs.

It quickly turned out that the Infernal Hellhounds brought half a regiment's worth of mercenaries along for the ride. The rowdy mechs-for-hire didn't possess the level of organization of a disciplined unit, but their numbers sorely pressured the defenders.

"Vincent." General Vasil called and pointed at a particular intersection. "A squad of mechs is inching towards the power plant. They don't have the numbers to overcome our guards, but I don't want to leave any chances for them to employ a trick. Get back to the stables and gather your subordinates. I want you to intercept these mercs."

"On it!" Vincent acknowledged and ran back to the stables where he and his crew of elites stowed their mechs. He tried to call up his subordinates through his comm, only to encounter nothing but static and junk. "Those stupid Hellhounds! Since when did they gather enough brain cells to operate a jammer?!"

"It's obvious the Third is not acting alone. Either some clever mercenaries or another regiment has provided them with support."

While Vincent loved springing traps on others, he hated being on the receiving end of one. The corridors started shaking as scores of mechs rampaged inside the only halls large enough to accommodate mech traffic.

"Whatever's the case, we won't be going anywhere without our mechs!"

They quickly reached the mech stables. Vincent sighed in relief when he saw that most of his men had already arrived. Johnson quickly shed his armor in order to don a piloting suit while Vincent started to organize his elites.

"I'm sure that everyone knows what's going on! The incompetent numbskulls manning the sensor arrays have dropped the ball! Right now, half a regiment of mechs along with a horde of mercenaries are rampaging inside our halls, cutting us off from our ships!"

"Let's fight!"

"Kick those bastards off our rock!"

"Silence!" The young man called. Leadership always came naturally to him, and despite his youth, he already earned his crew's respect. "The general has given his orders. A band of mercs are crawling towards the power plant. I won't tell you what will happen if our base loses power."

Everyone understood the gravity of the situation. Vincent and Johnson quickly boarded their mechs and powered them up. While Johnson piloted a fairly average rifleman provided by the Movement, Vincent still clung on to his flamboyant Marc Antony.

Months of campaigning had tarnished its armor. Nothing remained of its glorious light scheme. Despite its battered state, most of the damage was cosmetic.

"Move out!"

An eclectic mix of seven mechs followed Vincent's hybrid knight as they travelled to the power plant. They neared one of the hot zones but avoided the thick of it as they slinked off to the deepest part of the asteroid.

The sounds of battle and death slowly faded as they traversed a desolate tunnel. Vincent silently cursed as he considered the chances of making it out alive. A noted terrorist and murderer like him expected no clemency from the Mech Corps.

The falling debris and the gradual collapse of the base echoed the state of the resistance movement. A combination of attrition and lack of cohesion slowly broke apart the BLM. Vincent wouldn't be surprised to find out that a couple of traitors emerged from their ranks. How else could their sensors miss the approach of an entire regiment?

A light mech in front of Vincent suddenly jerked. "Detecting heat signatures in front of us!"

"How many?"

"Six or seven, I'm not too sure. They're mostly mediums."

"We outnumber them. That's good. They must have detected our approach as well, so there's no need to sneak around. Stick to a tight formation and unleash hell!"

With Vincent's sturdy knight at the fore, they stormed inside a large and open cargo hold. Due to the lack of supplies, the hold never filled up to capacity. Only a handful of isolated containers lay forgotten in the cavern. The lack of cover allowed both sides to peek at their opponents.

"Hello there Vincent." The pilot of a distinctive mech called out. "I've been expecting your arrival for a while now."

A mech that sported almost the same contours as Vincent's waited at the other side. The young rebel leader grew alarmed. "Who are you?!"

"You can call me Captain Caruthers."

"The bounty hunter? No wonder you've managed to track me down. The Infernal Hellhounds couldn't find their own tails with their own noses."

The two owned the only physical copies of the Marc Antony Mark I. The similarities between the two mechs caused their teammates to halt in confusion. In the meantime, the two mech pilots continued to chat.

"Does your mech hitch up when you overuse your wrist lasers?" Caruthers asked.

"Yeah it does. According to the technicians, the overheating easily disrupts the channels that feed into the engine. It's too easy to forget your limits when you keep blasting your lasers."

"I see you've stuck to the original mace."

The codpiece-sporting mech hefted its heavy mace and took a heavy swing with it. "I've tried out a couple of swords but I'm no good with them. I prefer the weight of a mace."

They brought their mechs to readiness once they finished talking about their mechs. The Phoenix Cry readied its sword while Vincent's tarnished mech held up its heavy tower shield.

"Boss! I've got them in my sight. Just say the word and I'll pump them full of lasers."

"Stop! This is between me and him!" Vincent declared as his mech gestured them away. "Back off and don't get in my way. This rotten merc is only here for me."

Both sides understood that a full-blown battle could quickly spin out of control. While the rebels had numbers on their side, the mercs sported pristine mechs. A fight to the death could quickly turn ugly for both sides.

"Are you ready kid?" Caruthers asked while his mech flourished its sword.

"Don't call me a kid, old man!"

Vincent blazed forth with his mech with its launchers disgorging its payload of rockets.

While the sudden strike caught the bounty hunter off-guard, Caruthers quickly reacted by bracing the Phoenix Cry's shield.

Many of the unguided rockets went wide, but at least half of them impacted the shield in a constant stutter of explosions. The rockets packed a lot of punch and easily chewed through half the layers of Caruthers' shield. The pounding mace attack that followed further stressed the remaining layers.

Instead of disengaging, the Phoenix Cry pushed forwards and stabbed forward with its sword. Vincent awkwardly blocked the strike with his shield, but his mech suddenly staggered backwards as the Phoenix Cry kicked the slab of metal.

As the distance opened up, the two sides started to pepper each other with laser beams.

"Why have you sought me out?" Vincent asked between breaths.

"Your mech is too ugly, that's why!" The captain responded as his mech closed in again for a frontal clash. "I'm sick and tired of my mech being mistaken for yours!"

The two mechs braced their shields as they collided against each other. The impact rang throughout the entire hall.

Chapter 139 Chaotic

As the duel raged on, both sides started to suffer. Vincent's aptitude was quite good. He controlled his mech with enough fluency and precision to outmaneuver his opponent.

Caruthers on the other hand possessed years of experience. His advantage in years polished his moves until they flowed seamlessly despite their deliberate speed.

The contrast between young and old affected their battle in many ways. While Caruthers kept pulling off tricks, Vincent always managed to avoid the damage by taking advantage of his superior reflexes.

The two hybrid knights eschewed all their other weapons in favor of their melee weapons. The beams fired from their wrist lasers splashed ineffectually against a shield while Vincent already expended his missile complement.

The younger combatant carefully noted how his opponent still hadn't launched any missiles. Vincent was wary of anything the captain's mech might

disgorge, so he kept his mech on its toes and never fully committed to a single attack.

This caused the battle to drag on in an even matchup where both mechs suffered similar amounts of damage. Vincent gave up on striking his opponent's mech directly and instead worked to bash its damaged shield apart.

"You've built up a lot of pent-up anger I see." Caruthers remarked as his mech accepted the hit but retaliated with a chop that Vincent barely managed to block. "Going pirate isn't doing your stress any favors!"

The Phoenix Cry suddenly changed its pattern by unleashing a bewildering assault. Sword after sword struck the battered rebel's mech, with at least half going through the young man's clumsy guard. The mercenary leader gave Vincent absolutely no reprieve from his furious strikes.

Instead of panicking, Vincent patiently endured the constant attacks. He knew the model intimately and was aware the Marc Antony couldn't sustain such an aggressive pace.

"Haha, how long can you hold on, old man?"

"Long enough to make you cry!"

The seasoned bounty hunter fought like an old but prideful lion while the young rebel held off the attacks like a patient turtle. Though Vincent fared relatively well, he still missed a couple of blocks, allowing his opponent's sword to chip away at his vulnerable joints.

Once the Phoenix Cry ran out of steam, Vincent finally gained the opportunity to dish back the hurt. His mech resumed hammering its mace against the bounty hunter's increasingly wretched shield. All of the damage it absorbed so far had not done its integrity any favors.

Its durability was at the end of its rope and both sides knew it. Despite his seemingly inevitable defeat, Caruthers still made use of the shield while it lasted, trading blows for blows.

Unlike his younger adversary, the bounty hunter ignored his opponent's shield and sought to damage the mech directly. Vincent only exposed his openings briefly, so most of the attacks glanced off his durable shield. Whenever the Phoenix Cry succeeded in landing a blow, it often lacked the force to punch through the model's substantial armor.

A huge crash echoed throughout the cavern as Vincent finally bashed an ugly hole through his opponent's shield. The Phoenix Cry staggered back and fired off a wrist lasers to cover its retreat.

The beams splashed harmlessly against Vincent's shield. The younger pilot ignored the lasers knowing that a hybrid knight like his own could take it. He did his best to pursue the wiley bounty hunter only to find out his opponent clearly his tactical retreats.

"You coward! Get back here!" Vincent yelled as his mech fired off its own laser beams in response.

The situation changed abruptly when additional forces arrived at the cargo hold. Vincent broke off his pursuit once he spotted that the mechs varied wildly in appearance.

Vincent finally realised why Caruthers dragged out the duel. "You honorless dog! You were buying time!"

"Did you think treacherous scum like you deserve to be treated with honor? Hahahaha!" The mercenary captain laughed as about twenty mercenary mechs fanned out to surround Vincent and his crew. "Your little sister Catelyn sends her regards!"

His dreaded sister must have put a massive bounty on his head. Certainly it must have been quite a sum, or else the mercs would have competed against each other for his head.

Just when things couldn't go worse for Vincent, Caruthers finally unleashed his missiles. Vincent's mech quickly braced its shield, but the streaks of death flew right over its head and impacted the exit leading to the power plant.

Everyone momentarily lost their footing as the missiles detonated their non-standard high explosive payloads against the cavern. The large amount of successive explosions weakened the rocks and dislodged a significant amount of chunks that piled up in front of the exit.

Caruthers just cut off their escape route.

"FIGHT!" Vincent uttered and pushed his mech into a thundering charge.

The sudden act propelled the rest of his men to resist to the end. There was no point in surrendering, as the Bright Republic never forgave the rebels for its many bombings.

With their lives on the line, the rebels fought with no reserve. Their sudden ferocity pushed back the complacent mercenaries who thought the bounty was already in their grasp.

The mercs all held back for fear of damaging their expensive mechs. They mostly focused on containing the aggression and preventing the rebels from breaking through their lines.

Compounding their disparity was that the mercs fielded cheap, disposable frontline mechs. Most of these mechs lacked the flexibility of a regular humanoid mech due to the absence of fully articulated arms and specialized shapes.

One such mech looked like a walking gun platform. The crude-looking mech sported twin ballistic cannon barrels instead of fully articulated arms and it also lacked a head entirely. The sensors and many other essential systems had been integrated in its large barrel-shaped torso.

Such a design might not be versatile, but when fielded in large enough numbers they made for an intimidating sight.

The large number of frontline mechs kept peppering the outnumbered rebels with their prodigious firepower. Meanwhile, Caruthers and the handful of other melee mechs tried to slow down their desperate opponents.

Two crazy mechs focused their wrath on Captain Caruthers. Even as the mercs continued to shoot apart the rebel mechs, they both hammered the Phoenix Cry with axes and lasers. The bounty hunter barely fended them off using his threadbare shield.

He still managed to take a peek at the overall situation and discovered something disconcerting. "Where is Vincent?"

The young rebel's mech had left the fight and approached one of the containers. It bashed apart the hatch with its mace before stowing the weapon to free up its hand. It retrieved a large, reinforced barrel that barely fit in the mech-sized hand.

"You think you got me? Think again!" Vincent roared as his mech threw a barrel in the middle of the fight. The mech quickly repeated its actions, causing half-a-dozen barrels to spill a strange, fluorescent fluid over some of the mechs.

"What's this?"

"Heavens! That's high-density shuttle fuel!"

"Who the hell stores flammables in a random container like that?!"

"Pirates and rebels aren't big on safety, you know!"

"Stop fighting! Don't ignite the fuel!"

The mechs belatedly stopped fighting, but it was too late. Vincent's mech raised its arm and fired off its laser cannon. The thick beam instantly hit a patch of fuel, causing it to ignite in a massive blaze that overloaded everyone's sensors.

By the time their systems compensated, they realized that half of the mechs erupted into flames. The inferno didn't distinguish sides as the fuel splashed both mercs and rebels alike.

Most of the mech pilots followed their training and quickly ejected once they realized they couldn't put out the fire. Those who remained performed all kinds of shenanigans such rolling their mechs over the ground.

While the mercs fussed over their friends, Vincent quickly took the chance to flee. His battered Marc Antony charged forth with its shield and slammed into one of the lighter frontline mechs. The impact crunched aside the flimsy mech into an awful heap. The rebel leader quickly took advantage of the opening and slipped past the mercs.

"Boss!"

"Traitor!"

"General Vasil won't let you get away with this!"

Vincent felt no regret in leaving his subordinates behind. He only cared about saving his own hide. Besides, the general likely wouldn't fault him as Caruthers conveniently collapsed the route to the power plant. The only way to get past that obstacle quickly was to use a digger module which none of the mercs possessed.

"Get back here Vincent!" Caruthers yelled as he and a couple of mercs followed on his heels.

They quickly neared the conflict zone where the 3rd Infernal Hellhounds stubbornly blocked the routes to the ship bay. The chaos of battle quickly engulfed Vincent's fleeing mech, causing the pursuing mechs to lose track of their prey.

"VINCENT!"

Despite their best efforts, the mercs failed to sniff out their bounty. The rebels and pirates who desperately tried to punch through the Hellhounds increasingly brought more mechs to the fore. Caruthers and the rest of the mercs were forced to drop their search and help the Hellhounds withstand the latest wave.

Captain Caruthers gnashed his teeth as his mech moved into position. "I'll get you for this, Vincent! You haven't seen the last of me!"

As a significant portion of the Bentheim Liberation Movement fought for their lives, Ves leisurely ate his lunch aboard a fairly expensive passenger liner.

Though impressive in the standards of the Bright Republic, the Vision of Astoria did not measure up to the floating resorts of the Friday Coalition.

Unlike the Torch of the Vanguard, the Vision used an older generation FTL drive that forced the ship to jump further from the edge of a star system.

Everytime the passenger liner made a stop, she had to spend a large amount of time to reach the inner system and dock at a station.

Ves patiently endured the stops as this was already the most direct route from Bentheim to Rittersberg. The two core star systems were located at the opposite ends of the Republic's borders. It made for a lengthy and somewhat boring flight.

Even Lucky stopped exploring the ship. The lazy gem cat simply sought out Ves and slept on his lap whenever possible.

"We're almost there, Lucky. Our ship is almost out of FTL."

After finishing his lunch, Ves brought his cat to the upper deck and entered the observatory. Many other passengers had already arrived to take a seat or grab a snack from one of the vendors.

A shipwide alert informed the passengers of the Vision's imminent transition back to normal space. Ves quickly took one of the dwindling seats and looked upwards at the swirling grey confusion beyond the ship's transparent windows.

A few minutes later, a black expanse of stars replaced the hypnotic view as the Vision of Astoria finally reached the Rittersberg System.

Beyond the emptiness of space, a large amount of ships and defensive installations loomed over a massive starfort.

The ancient structure along with three identical forts had been built by the descendants of the original pacifists who settled this remote system. They salvaged many unique systems from their old Rubarthan capital ships and incorporated them seamlessly into the central structures of the forts.

Among those, the gravitic anchor played an essential role in keeping the starfort relevant. They distorted the surrounding gravitic topography and drew in every incoming ship that travelled to the Rittersberg system.

Any hostile force that wished to invade the Republic's capital had to overcome a starfort before they opened up the rest of the system. The Republic hadn't slacked off and constantly reinforced the forts until they reached a point where they were virtually impregnable to any conventional force.

Perhaps the Vesians might be able to overwhelm one of the forts if they were willing to sacrifice a couple of divisions of mechs. Such a price was too much to bear. If any Vesian monarch tried to force an offensive, they'd be deposed by their own subjects before such madness could go through.

"I'm finally back." Ves sighed as he drew his eyes past the giant starfort and tried to spot one of the twinkling lights that represented the capital planet. "I wonder if anyone still remembers me."

He graduated from the Rittersberg University of Technology with grades that were only slightly above average. Most likely, no one expected Ves to amount to anything. His father had to go into debt in order to cobble up a shabby mech workshop, and that still left him with little means to acquire a production license.

Things were different now. With the help of the System, Ves rapidly established his chops as a young but promising mech designer. In fact, Marcella recently transferred 60.8 million credits to his bank account after handing over his finished products.

"I wonder what my grandfather will say when he sees how much profit I've made."

Chapter 140 Larkinson Compound

The star system that hosted Rittersberg used to be endowed with lots of exotic resources. It used to be an oasis compared to the barren desert of its surrounding systems. The pacifists exiles who wearily escaped from the fighting in the center of the Komodo Star Sector eagerly laid down their foundations in this relatively rich star system.

All of the deposits had been depleted after a hundred years of intensive mining. The initial boom in resources had fueled the construction of the initial colonies and expanded the reach of the descendants until they carved out their own place in the galaxy.

The Vision of Astoria along with every other ship had to dock at a giant space station orbiting a very remote dwarf planet. Ves and Lucky joined the other passengers in exiting the passenger liner and had gone through multiple security screenings and identity checks before the dour-faced security officers pushed them onwards.

"Security is even tighter than before."

"Of course it is!" A pot-bellied man replied as he frequently looked at the time. "If you think this is bad, wait until the war starts in earnest. Most civilians won't be able to enter the system."

A lot of visitors bemoaned the current state of unrest. The tourists and civilians who wanted to celebrate the new year at Rittersberg had to wait for hours before they received permission to move on to a navy-operated transit shuttle.

Fortunately for him, Ves got lumped in with the veterans and active servicemen who enjoyed preferable treatment. He had already become a notable citizen when he reached the finals of the Fusion Cup so no one gave him any hassle. Even his potentially dangerous gem cat had been cleared to accompany him, though with caveats.

Lucky resentfully yowled at Ves. His paws had been locked together with resilient cuffs, preventing him from deploying his claws effectively.

"Just deal with it Lucky." Ves tried to soothe his pet. "You'll be free to roam around once we reach the Larkinson Compound."

They boarded a secure shuttle that slowly brought them to the inner system. As a precaution, the only ships, shuttles and transports that operated within the system were directly crewed by the navy. The Rittersberg System was the only place in the Republic that remained untouched by the rebels.

After two days of plodding, the shuttle finally reached one of the civilian space stations orbiting the first planet from the sun. It used to be a fairly hot planet, but extensive terraforming had tempered the climate until it closely resembled that of Ancient Earth.

The space station itself looked spectacular as well. Designed for form as well as function, the triangular construct offered a spectacular view of the green jewel below. A harmonious ensemble of trees and flower graced its elegant interior and enchanted many first-time visitors.

Only the abundant patrols and the heavy-handed security measures marred the tranquil sight. The visible security presence was actually a lot more blatant than he expected.

"Did something happen?" He asked a crowd of random visitors.

"Didn't you hear? The 3rd Infernal Hellhounds found and attacked the headquarters of the BLM!"

Ves immediately stopped and turned towards the woman who answered. "The Bentheim Liberation Movement? Truly? How did it go?!"

"Don't know for sure yet, but we've given the rebels a bloody nose alright. The Republic is keeping a tight lid on the news."

Even after Ves browsed the galactic net on his comm, he found nothing useful. The Mech Corps released a short statement that they considered the attack a success, but warned that the BLM still possessed a lot of assets and that they might retaliate in the coming days. The news was ominous and it explained the tension hanging in the air.

"Hopefully they took out Vincent. I should have never customized a mech for him even if he paid an extravagant sum."

He still suffered from the fallout of Vincent's madness. Strictly speaking, an arms manufacturer like Ves should not be held responsible for the crimes committed by his customers. If this were so, then almost every major mech and weapons manufacturer

He still felt bad about it nonetheless. For a long time, he only sold two mechs. A decent bounty hunter bought his first model, while the other went to a mass-murdering terrorist. Ves still carried that cross to this day.

Fortunately, he already redeemed himself to the authorities. With Master Olson from the mighty Coalition vouching for his name, no government agency dared to bring him into custody.

After a short wait, a different shuttle brought him and his cat down to Rittersberg's famed spaceport. Its construction resembled a crane about to take flight. The shuttle landed onto one of its many feathers before disgorging its passengers.

Once everyone stepped out, the shuttle lifted off and headed to a different destination in order to pick up those who wished to depart. In the meantime, the 'feather' everyone stood on suddenly detached from the base of the main construction.

"Whoa?! What's going on? Are we falling?!"

Many of the passengers already expected the platform to detach and float to the surface. A few of the friendlier ones reassured the first-timers that this was nothing special.

As the feather platform floated downwards, it flew past several marvellous sights. The transparent crane in the center gave everyone a good view of its many shopping boulevards and exquisite restaurants. Those who stood on the other side got a good view of the surprisingly low-rise metropolis called Kelnar.

Only a couple of high-rise structures dominated its carefully designed urban planning. The most notable of which consisted of the massive Eternal Lighthouse that was supposedly lit by an undying flame. Even at this distance, Ves could see the white marbled structure as clear as day.

Once the feather touched down on the ground, everyone picked up their luggage from a nearby hall and hailed an aircar. Ves did the same and boarded a fairly swift but expensive car in order to reach his destination faster.

The aircar zipped away and flew away from Kelnar. The densely-populated city made way for elegant parks and stately-looking manors. Those who earned the right to live in those mansions were all bigshots of the Republic. Some of them even formed an entire dynasty of civil servants who all worked in the same branch of government.

After a half-hour flight, the aircar finally reached one of Kelnar's satellite cities. Varleton was home to a military base along with several other related facilities. A lot of families with ties to the military settled down in this quiet city.

The Larkinson Compound was situated in a tranquil privileged community that housed many mid and high level military personnel. Many Larkinsons who for one reason or another wished to carve out a life on their own resided in the compound. In fact, most of the residents consisted of elders along with some orphans and widows.

Death could happen at any time. Any Larkinson who signed up for the Mech Corps might one day return to their families in a coffin. The last Bright-Vesia War had reaped the lives of several uncles and aunts. Ves was fortunate that his father survived the war with his hide intact.

"We're finally home." He said while stretching his arms.

Lucky curiously stepped forth and sniffed the alien grass. Once they exited the spaceport, security finally removed his restraints. The cat eagerly flexed his limbs throughout the entire shuttle ride.

"Come on, little buddy. Let's go inside and meet the family."

The Larkinson Compound might look like a peaceful manor complex on the surface, but it hid a deadly array of defenses. A couple of guards personally inspected Ves and his luggage before they cleared his identity. After stepping inside the courtyard, a dozen kids immediately scampered over.

"Ves! You're back! Yay!" A little girl named Janie celebrated. "Hug please!"

He obliged the girl as well as every other munchkin. Once he put down the last kid, Janie quickly glomped his leg and look up at him with a pleading expression.

"Can I have a mech now?"

"I want a mech too!"

"Whoa there kids, mechs aren't toys for you to play around, especially at your age." Ves tried to placate the mech-hungry brats. "Wait until you're ten years old."

Everyone moaned in disappointment. Ves didn't want to make them cry, so he thought quickly until his gaze landed upon Lucky. He walked past some of the kids and picked up Lucky by his chest.

"Look at my new pet! Isn't he cool? His name is Lucky, and he's a very playful cat."

The kids completely forgot about asking for their own mechs once they beheld the gem cat. Lucky's gorgeous appearance immediately entranced the boys and girls. When the cat released a questioning meow, Lanie started to squeal.

"He's so cute!"

"So shiny!"

"I want a dog like that too!"

Some of the kids had their own mechanical pets. For example, a couple of resplendent glass-like birds rested on a tree, while nearby a teenager played fetch with a titanium dog.

Despite the competition, Lucky effortlessly stole their hearts due to his cute and gorgeous appearance and intelligent behavior. Ves eagerly handed off his cat to Lanie to let the kids get to know his pet.

He smiled as the kids carried Lucky to a nearby playground. Ves used to be one of them. In happier times, he played with his fellow cousins and dreamed about piloting a mech.

"How times change." He sighed, and turned to find someone to talk to. "There must be someone here who knows what went on in the raid against the rebels."

As he walked deeper inside the courtyard, he spotted many relatives. Some were related to him by blood while others had married into the family. The latter earned the same status as the former as long as they carried the Larkinson name. The Larkinsons didn't make a big deal out of everyone's pedigree like they did at some of the more hierarchical families.

A couple of aunties sat on a creaking wooden bench. Even as they gossiped, they carefully watched over the children.

To the side, a dozen elders leisurely sipped their teas as they exchanged the same old war stories. Most of them looked harmless, but appearances were deceiving.

Closer to the central hall, a sizable gathering of teenagers and young adults surrounded a projection of an action-packed mech duel. They cheered and supported their favorite duelists when they appeared on stage.

He finally spotted an authoritative looking man in uniform watching from the porch. Ves briskly strode forth and reached the man as he gazed at the entire courtyard.

"Hi Maeser."

"It's good to see you Ves." The man greeted his nephew with a hug. "You've created quite a stir. Imagine your grandfather's face when he picked up his data pad one day and read the Rimward Star Herald. An interview with the renowned Herald definitely caught us off-guard. You're kind of a big deal now."

Ves couldn't suppress his grin. He finally starting turning the Larkinsons around. "It's been a challenging journey so far, but I couldn't have done it without my father."

The mood turned melancholic once he mentioned his still-missing father. Maeser Larkinson turned to Ves and stared at him with a measuring gaze.

"The patriarch told me they found traces of your father. Ryncol is keeping very dangerous company these days. We aren't sure of anything, but there are several indications that suggest he's still alive and well."

"Is grandpa around?"

"The minister recalled him to take part in an emergency session. I bet it's about the recent attack on the BLM. Nasty buggers, all of them. I'm glad we finally stomped on their faces for once."

The patriarch of the family was his grandfather Benjamin. Besides taking charge of the entire family, he also worked as an advisor at the Ministry of

Defense. His current position brought a lot of prestige to the Larkinsons, though the workload also took a toll on him sometimes.

"Don't worry Ves. The patriarch will be back in time for the celebration. By then you can ask him about your father's whereabouts."

Ves really hoped he could hear some good news for once. He really missed his father.