

Chapter 141 First Nigh

His first day back at the Larkinson Compound reminded him why family mattered. About seventy different relatives gathered around in a dining hall that could more than two hundred people. Many wives, children and elders settled into their seats.

Ves was one of few young men of working age present in the gathering. Only a couple of other nephews matches his age. They were mostly mech cadets if they were potentates and regular cadets if they were not.

The Larkinsons possessed a fairly strong aptitude for piloting mechs. A military family like theirs with several hundred years of history of piloting mechs built up a very robust foundation in their genes.

What distinguished families like theirs from the rest was that the chances of obtaining an acceptable aptitude was very high. Through the use of targeted fertilization techniques and various other methods to induce the right genes, around seventy percent of all the kids could expect to become a potentate when they reached ten years old.

It made the ones like Ves who failed their aptitude tests feel like they've let down their parents. Some could never get over the shame. Luckily, the Larkinsons were generous and they went out of their way to keep the norms feel welcome.

As a mech designer, he sat at a table with all the other norms. Their table might be a little less extravagant, but no one said a word of complaint. The mech pilots who bravely risked their lives deserved their due. And unlike many other people, the Larkinsons who tested positive always served in the Mech Corps instead of settling for the reserves.

Once everyone took their seats, one of the elders stood up. Ves easily recognized his grand-uncle Ovrin Larkinson, the brother of the patriarch. The

man had a wheezy voice due to some severe scarring that he never bothered to remove for some reason or another.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm glad to see you've all arrived. We are still expecting a couple of family members, but by and large we will only be celebrating the new year with half of our usual numbers."

The mood turned somber at Ovrin's foreboding words. "The Bright Republic has been generous with us in good times. Now that ill times are upon us, it is time to reciprocate their care by dedicating our lives to the state that nurtured us from birth."

Even the rowdiest kids agreed with his words. Every Larkinson had been brought up to appreciate the Republic.

Those who disagreed for one reason or another chose to leave the Larkinsons and take up another family name. This usually occurred when the children of fallen heroes blamed the family and the Republic for driving their parents away from them too soon. This was why the Larkinsons never numbered more than two hundred people even after many years of prosperity.

"Now, we have several announcements to make. First, with the onset of war, I can imagine that some of you might wish to relocate. If you don't mind parting with your friends and neighbors, you can take up residence in our compound."

Some of the Larkinsons sighed in relief at the offer. No one expected the prelude to war to be so dangerous. A terrorist attack could happen at any place and any time outside of Rittersberg.

Ovrin continued on with his second announcement. "Next, we'd like to bring the young ones to a tour of the capital. Some of you have never stepped foot in Rittersberg before. You'll be missing out on a lot of fun if you've never seen the Eternal Lighthouse, the Republican Assembly or the Founding Flag."

Some of the four to seven year old kids cheered with delight. Lanie, who still kept hold of a hapless Lucky, cheered with her distant cousins even though she grew up in Rittersberg.

"Finally, I'd like to bring a promising young man to everyone's attention. None of us has ever thought he could make it, but Ves has established a nascent mech workshop that is completely independent."

Uh oh. It sounded like his grand-uncle was talking about Ves. He adopted a nervous smile as everyone's eyes started to scrutinize his dashing form. His recent genetic touch-ups along with his expensive antigrav wardrobe drastically improved his image.

Last year he turned up to the celebration as an average student with no accomplishments. This time he looked like a consummate professional or a successful entrepreneur who already made it big. Ves started to enjoy the appreciative stares he received from his uncles and aunts.

"He has already achieved many notable accomplishments such as entering the finals in one of the Young Tigers Exhibition's sub-tournaments. Not only that, he profoundly impressed the entire star sector when he travelled all the way to Coalition space and won an even bigger competition! Everyone, please give Ves a round of applause!"

Many Larkinsons stood up and clapped. Ves saw that most of his relatives wished him well, but some appeared to be harboring ulterior motives. Only a couple of Larkinsons looked grumpy, but Ves never got along with them anyway.

Uncle Ovrin quickly ended his little speech for the night. Everyone started to dig in including Ves. He filled his plate with steak along with some some yummy vegetable couscous. The Larkinsons employed a professional chef among other staff.

An uncle who sat close to Ves started to strike up a conversation. "So Ves. How is life as a mech designer treating you?"

"It's a lot more difficult than I expected. My father and I started up a business with our own efforts. I'm saddled with a lot of debt at the moment."

"Ah, the perils of running a business. In this day and age, it's rare to see a man like you succeed where many mech designers have failed."

"I'm a lucky man. My father did most of the work before he disappeared. I only picked up where he left off."

His answer was short on details. Ves didn't care, as he felt he already said enough in his recent interview with the Herald.

His uncle pressed on. "Surely you're receiving help from somewhere. I can't imagine your little mech business is able to stay erect without some form of backing. What kind of help did you enlist, and how much did it cost?"

"My answer hasn't changed." Ves reiterated while he took a bite out of his juicy steak. "My father funded our initial investments by taking a boring loan from a small-time planetary bank. He also spent a lot of effort getting in touch with a grant institution from the New Rubarth Empire. The production licences I received from them are old and nearly outdated."

Frankly, he started to grow annoyed at his uncle's persistent questioning. Was he working for an intelligence agency or something? Regardless of the truth, Ves considered his uncle to be a pest and stopped responding to his asinine inquiries.

"I was just asking." He moaned. Who was he anyway? Ves never learned his name even as he spotted his face from time to time. "You should loosen up some more and share some of your bounty. Us norms should stick together and give each other a hand. I've got two mouths to feed back at home."

"Three if you count your wife."

The man harrumphed. "She can take care of herself."

The conversation slowly shifted away from Ves. The people around the table discussed their own ventures and how the recent unrest disrupted their lives.

"I can't imagine what is going on in the heads of those who joined the BLM. There's no way that Bentheim can stand alone. Even if our Republic is beaten back, the Vesians aren't going to miss the opportunity to snap them up. Everyone who lives in Bentheim needs to stop polluting their minds with credits and develop some common sense."

Half of the Larkinsons at this table had never moved away from Rittersberg. They all grew up on this opulent planet. Like many locals, they developed a superiority complex to the point where they considered the rest of the Bright Republic to be a backwards territory. For example, they still considered Bentheim to be a second-class system filled with greedy merchants.

A mature looking aunt added an important fact. "If I recall, Ves here lives right next to the Bentheim System. If anyone knows what the rebels are up to, it's someone like him."

Most of the norms turned to Ves. Forced on the spot again, he hesitated for a bit before trying to explain the many grievances Bentheimers held. Sadly, none of them fully understood how much the citizens of the port system disliked the policies imposed by Rittersberg.

"It's par for the course for Bentheim to share their massive wealth." His annoying uncle interjected. "We've invested a lot of manpower and resources to build up the Bentheim System into one of the star sector's premiere launching points into alien space. We've facilitated most of their contracts with the Common Fleet Alliance."

Many Larkinsons nodded in agreement. Ves did not even try to convince them otherwise. Without visiting Bentheim in the flesh, these idiots would continue to cling on to their prejudices.

Once the waiters served dessert, Ves quickly finished his ice cream and left the table as soon as possible. He couldn't stand their presence any longer.

Before he departed, he briefly approached the kids table. "How are you doing Lucky?"

The cat turned to Ves with a glare and actually hissed at him. The nerve of the cat!

"I gave Mr. Lucky here a bath earlier. He smells really good now!" Lanie chirped with a grin. The other little girls started to giggle as well. "Can I keep him?"

"Ah, I think it's best if I take him back for a time." He said while scooping a rose-scented gem cat from their table. "Don't worry, we're not going anywhere. You'll have plenty of opportunities to play with him for the rest of the week."

The kids took it well enough, which was good since Lucky clearly needed some time alone. Ves brought his pet away and walked outside. As Rittersberg's sun started to fade over the horizon, Ves took a seat at a nearby games table. A half-finished game of neo-chess laid abandoned and forgotten.

He worried about his father. Was he still alive? Where did he go? What kind of crowd did he hang out with? Ves hoped his father didn't have to suffer too much on his behalf when he passed the Mech Designer System onto Ves.

"Good evening Ves." Ovrin greeted him and took a seat at the other end of the chess table. "Do you want to play?"

"No thanks. I've never spent much time with the classics."

"It's a shame you missed out. We often teach the game to our young potentates in order to develop their sense of strategy."

As a norm, Ves missed out on a lot of things. He used to be jealous of his fellow cousins, but now that he stood on his own, he let go of his resentments. It all seemed petty now that he looked back.

"Why are you here, Ovrin?"

The old man took a deep breath. "The elders recently came together to discuss your rise, as it were. Your rapid career advancement took us all by surprise. It made us reconsider our treatment of you. While you are still young, you already capable of wielding a substantial amount of influence."

Ovrin had a point. His niece Melinda might be a capable mech pilot, but she only earned a modest salary. Ves on the other hand earned millions of profits with each single sale. While he still had to worry about the rising cost of raw materials and invest in newer assets, it was undeniably true that mech designers simply earned more.

He even suspected that his income soon dwarfed the family's top earners.

"So what are you suggesting, grand-uncle?"

"Ah, young ones. So impatient." The old man sighed. "Alright, let me get to the point. We'd like to invite you to our steering committee. As a budding mover and shaker, you deserve a place among us."

Every Larkinson who mattered joined the steering committee. The influential committee decided many things, such as the rules and the budget. They were also in charge of rendering judgement when a Larkinson had gone astray. Furthermore, they also approved marriages when they haven't arranged them already.

The offer genuinely surprised Ves. He always expected to join the steering committee eventually, just not this soon. Perhaps something else was behind this premature offer. Ves considered his options.

Chapter 142 Steering Committee

Ves spent the next two days in a leisurely fashion. He played with the kids and awed them with his mechanical skill by cobbling together a few toys. It truly warmed his heart to make his cousins giggle and laugh.

Besides amusing himself, he also caught up with the news when he talked to the more informed elders. Now that he joined the Larkinson Family's steering committee, he received access to their modest database and intelligence network. He already skimmed through the most recent files, but they only painted a scattered picture of current events.

Even the Larkinsons suspected that there were other influences at work. The amount of pirates and rebels rampaging through the entire star sector appeared to be too numerous and well-funded to be a homegrown phenomenon.

Despite these indications, the Bright Republic focused most of its efforts on the upcoming conflict with its irreconcilable neighbor. No matter what outsiders were up to, the Republic had to beat back the Vesia Kingdom first before worrying about the bigger picture.

The Kingdom happened to be a little bit larger and wealthier than the Republic. They owed most of their superiority due to possessing two port systems, which greatly extended their reach and shrunk their supply lines. Unfortunately for the Vesians, their port systems were poorly located and had little strategic value other than a convenient relay to ships looking to transit elsewhere.

"The Vesians have always been jealous at how much trade is diverted to the Bentheim System." Ves concluded. The upcoming war would likely revolve

around trying to conquer the Bentheim System. "Cloudy Curtain shouldn't attract too much attention, but it will definitely be in the line of fire at some point."

In fact, throughout the wars, when the Vesians succeeded in punching through the border, they often occupied the surrounding territories. An underdeveloped system like Cloudy Curtain only merited a tiny occupation force. They usually swept away the gangs and ensured none of the locals tried anything funny while their main forces proceeded to siege the Bentheim System.

Sadly, it appeared the Vesians made ample preparations this time.

"The Kingdom is actually grappling with fewer unrest than us." Elder Ovrin explained. "Their control over their society is much stricter than ours. More importantly, the so-called nobles and the royals actually came to a rare agreement to put down most of their disputes and focus their animosity onto us."

Ves frowned at the news. "The dysfunctional rivalry between the nobles and the royal family is the only reason why the Vesians have never fought at their best in the past few wars."

"Oh don't worry about that Ves. They can draft up a fancy paper all they want. Whether the Vesians will actually stick to it is another question."

"Still, it's rather uncharacteristic for the Vesians to shake hands and get along with each other. The nobles always wanted to depose the royal family and rule their state as a council. The monarchs always wanted to strip the nobles of their private armies. Their interests simply don't align."

"We have reason to believe the secret agreement is imposed by the same outside force that's been stirring the star sector. Their influence is substantial,

but I don't think they fully realize how quickly the Vesian nobles are willing to stab each other in the back."

Both of them shared a knowing look. The Vesians were capable of fielding a terrible army, but they always screwed up in terms of leadership. In comparison, the Bright Republic usually exerted competent leadership even if its soldiers weren't as hardened.

"Whatever the case, we expect the different factions to abide by the agreement for a year at the very least. Your home system is at risk if their offensive breaks through our lines. Are you sure you don't want to relocate your assets?"

He seriously weighed the choice, but eventually shook his head. "I think my father made his home on Cloudy Curtain for a reason. I don't want to let go of what he left behind."

"Fair enough. You're a Larkinson like the rest of us. I'm glad you're brave, but I'm not certain whether you are expressing it in the right moment."

The conversation went nowhere, so Ves changed the topic. "When will the steering committee convene?"

"The patriarch will return tomorrow. We'll hold a special session in order to induct you in our ranks. We'll also discuss next year's budget among other administrative decisions."

"Not a lot of Larkinsons have come this year. Will it be okay to hold a meeting with more than half of the committee in active duty?"

"Oh, it's mostly a matter of routine." Ovrin waved away the question. "Anything that requires a discussion has already been addressed. Besides some technicalities, we've already settled on the major points."

It sounded like the latest session before the new year celebration was just a last-minute check. Now that Ves joined their circle, he got to know that the Larkinsons owned a modest business empire on Rittersberg that earned the family about fifty million credits a year.

That might not sound like much compared to his own activities, but they were stable businesses. Ves knew more than anyone else how volatile and innovative the mech market could be. In contrast, the Larkinson Trust Fund invested in a number of hotels, apartments and other real estate that always maintained a stable stream of profits.

"We're starting to bolster our pension fund in preparation for the worst. It's always better to get on top of them instead of catching up to it afterwards."

Both of them grimaced a bit. The pension fund kept the widows and orphans clothed and fed. If the steering committee proactively put more money in its pot, then that meant they expected that not every Larkinson might survive the war.

Ves spent a moment to worry about the lives of those he cared about. Most of the Larkinsons were acquaintances to him, but certain relatives such as Uncle Ark or his cousin Melinda earned a special place in his heart.

After another day of fun and relaxation, the entire planet took on a festive cheer. A large amount of construction bots transformed the city of Varleton into a festive paradise full of blinking blue lights and streamers in order to complement the Republic's national color.

The smarter Larkinsons noted that the Republic spent a little more effort in this year's party. The government wanted to reassure its citizens by projecting strength and instilling pride.

The patriarch finally returned in the morning. His reinforced aircar actually arrived at the compound with a modest escort of mechs and infantry fighting vehicles.

The mechs quickly flew away once Benjamin stepped out, but the infantry remained and started to collaborate with the compound's existing security force.

"Alright everyone, I'm back!" He announced and sent out a command through his comm that alerted every committee member. "We convene in an hour. Don't be late!"

As a newcomer, Ves had to go through a process before he formally became a member of the committee. First, the Larkinsons confirmed his identity and sampled his hair, blood and other biological material in order to facilitate future checks.

Then, he had to sign a pile of documents. They mostly formalized his rights and obligations to the Larkinsons. He also had to sign some NDA's that forced him to keep quiet about the family's more sensitive matters. All of the paperwork was fairly standard so Ves didn't object.

Once they finished the formalities, the committee entered a lengthy square stairway that went deep underground. Ves initially expected to descend a couple of floors, but everyone kept walking down the steps in a monotonous fashion. Only after an estimated two hundred meters of walking did they reach an underground hall.

The hall resembled a temple in its stateliness and atmosphere. Many banners hung from the arches that extended from the walls and ceilings. Most of them depicted the Bright Republic's iconic torch and the Larkinson's iceberg crest.

When Ves walked past the golden double doors, he suddenly realized he entered an elevated section of the hall. Everyone adopted solemn faces as they started to take their seats on the cold, stone benches.

"Ves."

"Grandfather?" He turned to Benjamin. "What's in the middle?"

"Our history." The old man replied, and gently guided him forward. "

He recognized the Valiant. The first ancestor of the Larkinsons personally piloted the iconic heavy knight and earned the recognition of the young Republic. The mech was a piece of living history. Its scarred and broken appearance hinted at a story filled with bitter struggle.

Ves choked on his breath once he scrutinized his ancestor's steed in the perspective of a mech designer. Somehow, the ancient mech radiated an aura that tingled his X-Factor senses. The mech not only appeared to be a custom job, its rich experiences somehow enhanced its X-Factor beyond anything else he had ever designed before.

Could the Valiant actually possess an X-Factor of B or higher? His brain started to churn as he tried to recall his ancestor's story. Who designed the Valiant, and what was his relationship to his ancestor?

His grandfather suddenly bumped his back. "Ves. I'm sure the Valiant is interesting, but we have business to discuss."

"I'm sorry. I forgot myself for a moment. It's a magnificent mech. I'm lucky to see it up close."

While his grandfather approached the podium at the front, Ves took a seat at the bench closest to the mech. Despite the importance of this gathering, Ves forgot all about the steering committee and focused his entire attention on the

incredible mech in front of him. He tried to turn on his comm, only to find out it fizzled out.

"Damn. The family is sure being dramatic." He muttered under his breath.

The austere underground hall was surrounded by many layers of insulating material that hindered virtually every kind of handheld broadcast equipment. Various other security measures prevented any electronic device from activating and recording the proceedings.

Once everyone took their seats, the patriarch banged his fist against a special plate that cut through the chatter. "I hereby announce the start of our annual end-of-year session!"

His grandfather started to follow through the usual rituals. Every Larkinson including Ves offered some tribute to the Larkinson ancestor. They then memorialized the Larkinsons who died in the line of duty. Ves noted that the ritual explicitly excluded those who didn't die on the battlefield.

Strange.

Next, the patriarch addressed their last year's agenda and summarized the results. It turned out the family recently invested a lot of effort into advancing the careers of their younger mech pilots. The committee wanted them to be in the best position to fight the Vesians and come back alive.

As Ves listened to the various means in which they befriended and even bribed certain officers, he realized how much of an old boys' club the Mech Corps turned out to be. Every commanding officer in charge of a division, regiment or battalion wielded a wide range of autonomy. Getting onto their good sides insured they never mistreated the Larkinsons serving in their ranks.

After half an hour of dry reports, his grandfather finally raised a subject directly related to Ves.

"Many of you are already familiar with our very own mech designer." Benjamin said while everyone turned their gazes to Ves. This time he bore the scrutiny like a pro. "Some of us have considered a couple of proposals in light of his future potential. Ves, tell me your thoughts on the following."

His grandfather started off with a bang. "We'd like to purchase some stock in your business activities. If you're not opposed to the measure, we are willing to divert a portion of our trust fund to build up a stake in your venture once you incorporate your business."

The proposal completely caught Ves by surprise. "How much?"

"I think it's fair for the both of us if you give us a twenty-five percent stake for 500 million credits."

His heart almost skipped a beat when he heard the sum. Almost every other committee member looked shocked. No one imagined that his grandfather or whoever audited his business valued his small and risky startup at around two billion credits.

The Larkinsons relied on its massive trust fund built up over centuries to provide for everyone's pensions. Five-hundred million credits represented a substantial chunk of its liquid assets.

While many of the Larkinsons thought the price was too high, Ves instead thought the opposite. Considering his accelerated career advancement, his future business might become a lot more valuable than a couple of billion credits. As long as he had the System, his future was bright.

"I accept." Ves quickly decided. Despite the gross undervaluation, he didn't wish to act like a greedy toad like that obnoxious uncle he met a few days ago. He valued his family and wished for them to prosper alongside him. "I haven't set up a corporation yet. It's about time I did. I'll be glad to sell the family a twenty-five percent share. You won't regret it."

Chapter 143 Whereabouts

Not everyone agreed to throw 500 million credits away on an extremely risky business venture. One of the elders stood up and spread his hands.

"I object!"

Ves recognized the skinny form of Third Elder Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson. His physique resembled Ves' in that he had never trained his body to endure the rigors of piloting mechs. The elder should be someone who supervised the family's overall finances.

"Let him speak!" Grandfather Benjamin forcefully spoke, causing everyone to shut their mouths.

"Thank you Patriarch. According to our analysis, while Ves has cleared the first hurdle and is able to manufacture mechs, his business is not in an ideal position to sustain his current level of profitability. He is far too young and his assets are already depreciating very hard."

Since the third elder dared to talk about his business directly, Ves felt obliged to respond. "Elder Raymond, you are overstating the risks and exaggerating the costs. I have worked hard this past six months to kickstart my mech business to the point where I am able to sustain a single production line. Last month, I fabricated eight whole mechs and earned a gross profit of sixty million credits!"

Sixty million credits! The Larkinson Trust Fund had to wait an entire year before it could accumulate such a sum. Ves on the other hand only required a single month! Every committee member had to suppress their excitement.

"You've already peaked!" Elder Raymond retorted with a slam of his palm.

"Any market analyst is able to predict that you won't be able to sustain your current level of profits! Resource costs are rising and your production licences are about to become irrelevant in a couple of years. Might I remind everyone

that a relatively affordable production licence can easily cost around two billion credits!"

Two billion credits! Many committee members gulped when they heard the sum. The business savvy people among them confirmed Raymond's assertion.

"The mech industry is characterized by high risks and high returns. What I mean by that is that you can easily earn a fortune today but get utterly ruined tomorrow! Don't be blinded by his current monthly income. It's merely a snapshot of his peak. With just the meager amount of capital he has on hand, he's unable to ramp up his production and earn enough profit to finance the acquisition of an up-to-date production license!"

The mood started to turn against the decision to invest in a stake. While Ves actually benefited financially in the long run if he kept hold of every share, he disliked being painted as a foolhardy boy. He had his own pride.

"Elder Raymond, you have not taken my growth into account. I am apprenticed to a renowned Master Mech Designer from the Coalition. My current level of operations is but a springboard to designing a completely original mech. I am confident that my level of skill will grow to the point where I can design a viable original mech. I don't need to license an expensive complete design in that case. At most, I'll have to licence up to one billion credits worth of component licences."

His words sounded ambitious! No one ever thought Ves planned to design a completely original mech. Even the most boorish mech pilots among the crowd knew how difficult such a project must be.

Mech designers who designed variants were a dime in a dozen. Those who graduated beyond that point and designed a mech without any existing reference points deserved admiration from everyone. If the Larkinsons

brought up their own real mech designer, the family might be able to achieve a new level of prominence!

Grandfather Benjamin had enough of the back-and-forth. "Alright, pipe down everyone! This is a solemn committee meeting. We are here to decide the future of the Larkinson family. Do not disgrace yourself in front of our ancestor's Valiant."

The thought of showing their shameful sides to the Valiant abhorred the devoted Larkinsons. The temperature cooled down through Benjamin's intervention, allowing both Ves and Raymond to cool their minds.

"We are approaching a decisive moment of history." The patriarch continued in a level tone. "Our fates are tied to the Bright Republic, which isn't looking too healthy these days. Anything might happen in the future. In order to provide against contingencies, we need to hedge our bets."

Everyone sat still when Benjamin started to paint a grim picture of the future. Ves tried to keep his head sober. He belatedly realized that Benjamin soothed the committee members into accepting the decision to acquire a stake in Ves' mech business. Raymond didn't even get a chance to retort.

"Please raise your hand if you approve the previously raised proposal!"

Well over two-thirds ultimately raised their hands. Ves noticed that Benjamin bought over almost all of the potentates. The norms on the other hand glared resentfully at Ves. Why did someone like Ves deserved a 500 million credit investment while their own enterprises barely scraped by?

Elder Raymond shook his head. While he still disagreed, he knew where the wind was blowing so he ceased his protests and quietly backed down.

The rest of the meeting turned largely inconsequential to Ves. Instead, he resumed his study of the ancient heavy knight and its extremely potent aura. After all, it wasn't every day he chanced upon a mech that set his X-Factor

senses on fire. He eagerly wished the meeting would drag on so that he could make the most of this rare exposure to the historic mech.

Once his grandfather ended the session, everyone started to leave the hall. Ves dragged his feet because he still hadn't cracked the secret to the Valiant's abnormally strong X-Factor. He almost wanted to ask his grandfather to pass him some food and water and lock him inside!

Surprisingly, Benjamin asked Ves to stay behind, but not because of the valiant. Instead, his grandfather finally wished to talk about his missing father.

A couple of other elders stayed behind, including grand-uncle Ovrin and uncle Maeser. Ves guessed that his grandfather must have gathered the family's inner circle.

The constant waiting grated on Ves. "Can you finally tell me where my father has been spotted?"

"You best sit back for this little cousin." Maeser warned as he placed his hand on Ves' shoulder. "It's very complicated. From what little we managed to gather, it isn't looking pretty."

Grandfather Benjamin tentatively nodded. "Let's begin where we first found signs of Ryncol. Have you heard of the Nyxian Gap?"

"Isn't that a massive asteroid field filled with a loads of environmental hazards?"

"It's also located at the fringes of the Komodo Star System. With a decent enough FTL drive, you can springboard from the Gap to the neighboring Majestic Teal and Vicious Mountain star sectors."

In other words, lots of pirates along with every other kind of scum could be found in the Gap. The massive number of asteroids trapped in the warped gravitic environment provided pirates with the perfect hiding spots.

"To cut the story short, one of our sources has snapped an image of him at a busy market in the infamous Three Spokes Pirate Station."

The hall prohibited electronics from working, so Benjamin simply handed Ves a shiny printout. When Ves accepted the page, he stared at a somewhat grainy image of his father in the company of a band of menacing people.

"Are those pirates?" Ves hesitated to ask.

"Not quite. Our source has managed to learn that they call themselves the Cobra Cadavers. They appear to be a dark mercenary corps. We haven't found any other traces of the Cadavers in our archives, but they appear to be too seasoned to be a newly established group."

The findings astounded Ves. Cobra Cadavers? They sounded extremely ominous.

Measar, who sat next to Ves, shrugged his shoulders. "I almost couldn't believe it either when I first heard about it. We did some more digging until we finally managed to uncover more details. It appears that every member of the Cobra Cadavers are being hunted down by a shadowy organization called the Five Scrolls Compact."

His family introduced yet another unfamiliar name to Ves. "I can't say I've heard about them. They sound like serious business."

"I've had some dealings with the Five Scrolls Compact." Benjamin said with a very grim face. "The Compact is galaxy-wide cult of alien worshippers and doomsday lunatics. Even the Republic isn't clear of their goals, but from what we can tell, they've infiltrated every corner of human space."

When Ves asked a couple of questions about the Compact, none of the Larkinsons could actually explain what the Five Scrolls Compact actually did. Benjamin only heard rumors about data theft, brainwashing and nuking planets. The Compact definitely didn't play according to the rules.

Benjamin explained his suspicions. "We believe your father somehow incurred the wrath of this bunch of crazies. In order to avoid implicating you, he cut off all ties and fled to the Nyxian Gap. Even a massive cult like the Five Scrolls Compact can't hope to find a needle in this massive, spread-out haystack."

"If this secretive cult is after my father, why haven't they kidnapped me?" Ves worriedly asked. "They can easily nab me from my home in Cloudy Curtain if they wish."

"It's because the Mech Trade Association will hunt them down if they show up in civilized space." His grandfather answered. "The cultists all possess abnormal genes. Even if they cover up their faces, they can't hope to pass a security check."

The power of the MTA deterred every single state and organization from breaking its rules. Its military might was only second to the Common Fleet Alliance that collectively took charge of defending humanity's borders. Ves believed wholeheartedly in the MTA's ability to punish Five Scrolls Compact if they ever showed up.

Despite this security, Ves still worried about the reason why his father earned the Compact's ire. Did they know about the Mech Designer System? Even worse, had they created it in the first place?

Ves tentatively ruled out the possibility. If the Five Scrolls Compact paid some attention to his meteoric career, they must have realized that he used the System. For something valuable like that, they'd throw all caution to the wind and overwhelm the entire Bright Republic in order to take back their treasure.

Furthermore, he didn't think his father would do something stupid by handing over the System without expecting it to be left in a closet. Ryncol surely predicted that Ves made use of it in order to fulfill his dream of becoming a

mech designer. If the System wasn't safe to use, his father would have never handed it over to Ves.

The original owners of the System must be some other organization then. As long as Ves did not do anything too outlandish and attract too much attention, the hapless owners wouldn't be able to distinguish him from other geniuses.

Ves resolved to invest more resources into increasing his security and anonymity. He already mentally patted himself on his back for acquiring the anonymizer stamp from the System's Store.

After the other Larkinsons expressed their views, his grandfather smiled at Ves. "No matter what your father is planning, I'm confident he'll be able to roll with the punches. Ryncol has always been a scrappy one. The Nyxian Gap is a region of untold danger, but not to him. He'll be able to cling on to his life if nothing else."

The meeting ended in a somewhat depressing note. At the very least, the inner circle didn't blame his father for pissing off a galactic cult of dangerous weirdos. They unconditionally supported Ves and his father and didn't hesitate to offer some assistance.

Ovrin approached Ves after everyone started to walk up the stairway. "Ves? A moment please."

"What's the matter?"

"In light of the threats arrayed against you, we'd like to take some precautions. When you return home, we'll arrange a pair of mechs piloted by anyone who is available to accompany you on your journey. They'll be in charge of you and your workshop's safety from now on."

An actual mech escort sounded very welcome to Ves, but he hesitated a bit once he realized his grand-uncle wished to man the mechs with full-blooded Larkinsons.

"Shouldn't every able-bodied Larkinson be serving in the Mech Corps at this time?"

Ovrin smiled ruefully. "Every family has their misfits. There are certain elements in our younger generation who can't quite fit in a military outfit. Don't worry too much. The Larkinsons I have in mind are capable mech pilots."

Chapter 144 Growth

Ves reluctantly left the underground hall at Ovrin's insistence. While he really wished to study the venerable Valiant extensively, the hall was a sacred place. The Valiant also had its best days behind it. In order to preserve the heavy knight, the space needed to be subjected to a host of preservation routines such as reducing its gravity and pumping in some special gas.

Though he hadn't studied the Valiant long enough to uncover all of its secrets, he hadn't left without a harvest.

As they ascended the extremely lengthy stairway, Ovrin asked him a question.

"Do you know why your grandfather pushed through the proposal to invest in your company?"

"Is the family in trouble?"

"We are tied to the fate of the Bright Republic. What will happen if it falls one day?"

They'd be miserable beyond belief. As a quintessential military family who served the Republic for many generations, they could never find shelter in a neighboring state. No one would trust the Larkinsons if they discarded their oaths.

Ves understood his intentions now. "You're using me as an escape route."

In essence, the Larkinsons wanted to take advantage of his enviable relations with a venerable Master Mech Designer. As her apprentice in name, Ves could vouch for his family and facilitate their relocation to the Vermeer Group.

If Master Olson possessed a heart, she wouldn't object to saving his family. Most likely, such considerations were beneath her notice.

"It's merely a contingency." Ovrin added. "There are multiple considerations involved with the decision to invest in your company. Depending on your performance, you'll become a vital pillar to us in the future. Think of our initial investment as an expression of goodwill."

"Goodwill huh." Ves internally smirked. If the Larkinsons wished to show some actual sincerity, then they should have only settled for a one percent stake. "I'm open to collaboration, but I'd like to remain in charge."

"You're still the majority owner, so we won't quibble with the way you run your business. While there are some who think you're not up to the task, as long as you are able to deliver positive results, they won't be able to pull any tricks."

According to the Republic's laws, a minority shareholder was entitled to several rights. Even Ves couldn't block them from being a nuisance if they wished to. Fortunately, he still possessed an ample majority. As long as he didn't give them up, he'd never have to submit to someone else's orders.

When Ves returned to his guest room, Lucky jumped from his perch and brushed his body against his owner's legs.

"Haha, I told you I'd be back."

As Ves sat on his bed, he considered everything he learned today. First, his fears that his father met an unfortunate end was abated. Even if his father had to cut all of his ties and live like a rat, he still retained his life.

"My father is tougher than anyone. He won't be fazed by the pirates lurking in the Nyxian Gap. The Five Scrolls Compact on the other hand sounds like real trouble."

Any organization that extended its reach across the galaxy had to be a pinnacle organization. If the mighty Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance couldn't eliminate the Compact, then Ves absolutely couldn't underestimate them. He still wondered why the Compact hadn't threatened him yet.

His logic told him that the conflict between the Compact and his father had no relations to the System. Something as miraculous as the System warranted an immediate and overwhelming response once they figured out that Ves made use of it.

If the Compact wasn't after the System, why were they targeting his father in the first place?

"I don't have enough information." He concluded. He could speculate all he wanted, but he couldn't act on them without proof. "The intelligence we've gathered is also a little sketchy. I can't put too much trust in second or third-hand sources."

In order to corroborate what he heard, he opened his comm and visited the Clifford Society's online portal. This time, he didn't bother entering its virtual world. Instead, he opened an online archive and tried to find what the Society knew about the Compact.

Nothing. Ves couldn't find anything at his level of jurisdiction. His search results happily noted that it found mention of the Five Scrolls Compact in three different documents, but he would only be able to read them if he reached the master level.

Master level! A Master Mech Designer is not a cabbage that you could find on the road!

The insane level of jurisdiction required to read about the Compact spoke for itself. This must be an extremely formidable organization that not even the Friday Coalition wished to provoke.

The lack of information made any further speculation useless. For now, Ves had to focus on growing his strength. Just because the Compact hadn't done anything to Ves didn't mean they might change their mind later on. If some shadowy cult started to threaten his life, he wanted to be ready to fight back.

Instead, he used the rest of the day to ponder the puzzle that was the Valiant. How could it surpass his own deliberate efforts to induce the X-Factor? The mech was several hundred years old. Had its original designer already become aware of this metaphysical element.

His search through the galactic net and in the steering committee's internal network yielded little results. The early days of the Bright Republic had been very tough. Many pirates and outside factions frequently preyed on the nascent Republic who still hadn't completely shed its pacifist leanings.

They were only able to turn the tide when they started to employ battle-hardened mercenaries. The first-generation Larkinson acquitted himself extremely well as a mercenary, so much so that the Republic rewarded him with land, status and citizenship.

The various archives described his ancestor's feats in excruciating detail. Ves already learned about his performance in battle when his father tutored him when he was still a kid.

After half an hour of searching, Ves gave up. "These stupid archives!"

None of the historic documents mentioned anything about where the Larkinson ancestor got his mechs. His fruitless search couldn't find a single

mention of the mech designer who painstakingly tailored a custom mech for his ancestor. Someone like that must be a supreme existence, but Ves couldn't proceed without further clues.

Ves only had his observations to go on in his quest to unravel the secrets of the Valiant. For now, he only had a single bold guess.

When he looked at the Valiant, he got a sense of its history. His memories of what he read about the Larkinson ancestor's performance in battle came to the fore. It was as if the mech became the ancestor's living testament.

"It all comes down to life."

What if every mech started as a blank slate? What if these mechs were influenced by their experiences?

His perspective suddenly shifted. If mechs possessed life, then they were also capable of growth. Every life started as a newborn. At this stage they were weak and infirm. If nurtured properly, every life was capable blooming into an incomparable existence.

"A life is never static. They start off weak, but who can say they can't grow up to be giants?"

When Ves compared his gold label mechs to the Valiant, he got a sense that he was comparing a couple of toddlers to an elderly but grizzled veteran. Their strengths simply couldn't compare.

It begged the question whether the Valiant started off this strong. He very much doubted it. Its designer might have passed on some metaphysical traits, but most of the Valiant's aura had most likely been acquired later.

Did this mean that his own mechs might be capable of growth?

"Most likely not."

He never took growth into account when he passed on his intent to his design. They were designed to be strong at the very start. Ves never imagined that his mechs could strengthen its intrinsic X-Factor after he fabricated them. He was under the impression that the mechs were fixed at birth.

In the end, he blinded himself with his own assumptions. More specifically, he still looked at mechs as if they were machines. Before seeing the Valiant, he subconsciously assumed that he could manufacture a complete life.

So long as he manufactured the right inspirations, he could sharpen them into a purposeful intent that complemented his designs.

It completely ignored that life was capable of growing from their humble beginnings. Every newborn needed two things before it turned into a formidable existence.

First, they had to possess a good foundation. An ant remained an ant. Even the most ferocious ant could easily be stomped by a harmless human child.

Ves guessed that his current progress in the X-Factor fell under this category. His recent designs proved that he was capable of achieving a fairly rating according to the System. Nevertheless, he faintly thought that he came across a bottleneck. A moderate rating of C+ was the best he could achieve so far.

So how could he achieve a higher rating? He used to think he only had one avenue available, and that was to keep on strengthening the foundation. While this might ultimately be the correct path, Ves did not have a single clue on how to proceed. He was completely in the dark.

Now, he uncovered another path. While it might not lead to his initial destination, it nonetheless enlightened him to another aspect of the X-Factor. Now that he was aware of the previously hidden growth component, he could start to replicate the phenomenon in his own designs.

He repeatedly thanked his ancestor and the Valiant's mech designer. His trip to Rittersberg had been worth it for this lesson alone.

"It's time for dinner!"

Ves held onto Lucky and brought him along. "Let's go and celebrate."

The entire Larkinson Compound turned into a festive location. The holiday cheer infected all of the kids, who eagerly ran around with their little sparkling flags.

The cooks served up an extravagant feast for new year's eve. The estate even hired some musicians to put on a performance.

Later at night, the new year finally dawned. The entire sky lit up as fireworks loudly proclaimed the start of another year. Elaborate projections came into existence. They first displayed the Republican Torch before projecting a series of iconic images of the Republic's proudest moments.

Lucky meowed in confusion at the noise. He didn't know what to make of all the fireworks. Perhaps he thought the entire planet came under attack. Over time, his mechanical cat calmed down once he saw that no one panicked.

A grinning Lanie ran up to Ves and held out her arms. "Can I hold Lucky again?"

"Sure." He said, and handed off his cat.

The little girl giggled before scampering away with her prize. Ves smiled at her antics. His recent brainstorming caused his thoughts to wander. How would Little Lanie's life look like after a decade or two? Would she grow into a demure and stately lady, or would her upbringing shape her into a powerful amazon mech pilot?

"There is so much variation in life."

No one could predict the future. As Lanie belonged to the Larkinsons, she would surely lack for nothing. However she turned out, Ves hoped she didn't grow up with any regrets.

Throughout the night, the Republican Torch with its bright blue fire never dimmed. Every planet in the Republic's borders projected the same unyielding symbol. It carried the hope and ambition of the entire Bright Republic. No one wanted the Vesians to invade and despoil their precious planets.

The torch inspired everyone. They looked at the torch with sparkling eyes and imagined different dreams. The kids imagined taking up the torch one day. The adults resolved to fight for their loved ones. The elderly prayed their previous sacrifices had been enough.

As for Ves? His ambition was boundless.

Chapter 145 Escorts

The Larkinson Compound's tranquility enamored Ves. Many times, he wondered if he could put down his work and spend the rest of his life in idle bliss. He already knew of a handful of relatives who ended up as a good-for-nothings that never amounted to anything in their lives.

Ves shook his head. "The galaxy is too dangerous to let my fate be entrusted in the hands of others."

Even the Larkinsons started scrambling for a safety net. In such dangerous times, Ves would be a fool to assume that business would be as usual.

The next day, Ves prepared to depart. He already packed his luggage and ate some breakfast with the early risers. After saying his farewells, he exited the dining hall and brought his luggage and Lucky to the front.

His new escorts awaited him there. They were both a little older than him and carried themselves with an air of overwhelming confidence.

"Hey. Are you the geek my grandpa assigned to be your guard?" A woman asked. She looked at him with a disdainful expression, no doubt filing him away as a twig she could snap in two at any time. "This duty is a gigantic waste of time. Why do I have to babysit this stupid pig? I'd rather go back to the arena!"

They already got off to a wonderful start. His niece obviously aspired to be a mech duelist. Generally, the Larkinsons disdained fighting for sport. They treated the art of piloting as a sacred duty only to be employed for righteous purposes.

To abandon some of your morals to fight for fame and fortune was to turn your back on your heritage. No wonder the family packed her off to Ves. A rural planet like Cloudy Curtain offered very little amenities in the area of mech sports. Let alone a team, it didn't even have a mech arena at all!

Ves ignored her glare and introduced himself. "My name is Ves Larkinson, and I'm a mech designer. You'll be accompanying me to Cloudy Curtain and hopefully keep me out of trouble. I hope we can work together for the betterment of the family."

The woman twirled her purple bangs and sneered at him. "You sound like grandpa Ovrin. Are you on meds or something? That's no way to talk to big sister Raella here!"

He could already feel a headache coming. Ves decided to tackle Raella later and turned to his second escort. The man stood quietly and watched their interaction with bemusement.

Unlike Raella who dressed like a punk out for a party, his male cousin dressed like an officer of the Mech Corps. From his straight-backed posture to his crew-cut hair, the man looked straight out of a military recruitment poster.

Though he was taller than Raella, his muscles were wiry and compact. He also wore an electronic visor shaded in blue.

"Melkor Larkinson. Mech Pilot." The man answered when Ves kept staring at him. "I'm just here to fulfill my duty."

The visored Larkinson offered little else. Ves gave up on trying to be friendly and boarded the aircar reserved for all three. The vehicle zipped towards Kelnar's outskirts and reached the gigantic spaceport shaped like a crane after a quiet flight.

Many travellers had already arrived at the busy spaceport. The tourists and visitors finished celebrating the new year and had to go back to work. Ves, Raella and Melkor had to keep their floating luggage close in order to avoid bumping into the crowd.

After pushing their way forward, they reached their platform in the nick of time. The feather-shaped platform lifted off from the ground, carrying its passengers up to the air, whereupon a space-capable shuttle landed onto its surface.

The shuttle ascended into the sky and reached a familiar space station. The trio got to enjoy its elegant interior for a couple of hours until a passenger liner called the Greenwind arrived at the station. After the incoming passengers left the spacecraft, the trio boarded the ship along with the other outgoing passengers.

The Greenwind was the sister ship of the Vision of Asteria, which Ves previously rode to Rittersberg. He quickly settled into his room as the vessel slowly accelerated towards the system's nearest Lagrange point.

After waiting her turn, the Greenwind finally transitioned into FTL. Her long journey to Bentheim had just begun. The family already arranged a three bedroom suite. While his cousins settled into their rooms and brooded on their exile from Rittersberg, Ves wanted to spend his time more productively.

"Fun time is over. It's time to get back to work."

Ves wanted to accelerate his company's growth. The family already promised half a billion credits as soon as he registered his business as a corporation. Since all of his assets were back at Cloudy Curtain, he first had to return home before he could start the process.

In the meantime, the corporate lawyers employed by the Larkinsons already began to draft the paperwork. Ves knew little about the complexities involved with writing up the formal articles of incorporation. He gladly handed off the responsibility, though he also reminded himself to read over their work once the lawyers hammered out the details.

He already relayed his demands to the lawyers. For now, Ves wanted to keep it simple. He didn't wish to deal with a convoluted stock structure where one type of stock has ten times the voting rights of another stock.

He also didn't want to implement a bloated board of directors. For now, he settled with the absolute minimum. Since his company only had two shareholders, Ves could simply appoint himself as the chairman and his grandfather Benjamin as the only other director of the board.

It sounded a little sketchy, but his company didn't require any oversight. Despite the incredible sums involved with each transaction, Ves operated a very simple business. He only had one full-time employee so far. For now, Ves didn't trust anyone else to help run his company.

Since he couldn't do much about his matter, Ves turned to another matter he left by the wayside. "It's about time I do something with the scavenged Dortmund parts. Carlos should be able to fabricate a silver label Mark II by now."

Once his fabricator began to fulfill Marcella's orders, Ves could devote his complete attention on the reconstruction project. He already made good progress on drafting up a plan to restore the missing and broken parts.

He left the issue of hacking the salvaged processors for later. The matter required delicate handling as it wasn't exactly legal to mess around with the programming of an expensive industrial printer.

Ves pulled up a blueprint of the industrial printer and started to study it in detail.

Time flew by. Everyone settled in a routine. His two cousins slowly loosened up as the distance to Rittersberg increased. Perhaps it finally dawned on the pair that there was no turning back.

One day, Raella spontaneously approached Ves. "Can I hold him?"

She gestured to Lucky. The cat lounged on his desk next to his work terminal.

Even as Ves nodded his head, Lucky already jumped in her arms and started acting cute. Even a bitter woman like Raella got charmed by the gem cat's wiles. Ves and Melkor both scratched their heads when Raella acted identical to their little cousin Lanie. Did girls spontaneously lose half of their intelligence when faced with the cat?

"Huh. I never imagined fake pets like these could be so fun." She smiled. "It's a lot better than the stupid parrot my former team leader always paraded."

Her remark provided Ves with an opening. "So you already competed in the mech games?"

"Yup. Me and five of my BFFs formed a team ever since we graduated from the mech academy. We called ourselves the Wailing Witches. It's an awful name, now that I think about it. We must have been getting our rocks off with the good stuff when we registered the stupid name."

"How did you do in the arena?"

"Oh, we did okay." His niece responded as she sat down on a sofa and rested Lucky on her lap. "We frequently fought in the amateur circuit and slowly made a name for ourselves. The frequent battles took a toll on our allowances, but we improved by leaps and bounds. Going professional was just around the corner as far as our team was concerned."

"Obviously that didn't happen." Ves noted. "What went wrong?"

Raella's fury returned. "Our bitch of a team leader stabbed us in the back, that's what happened. Virma McCullen used to be the lynchpin of our circle of friends. She's actually something of a prodigy at the academy and one of the few who got sent to Rittersberg on a scholarship. She could have made it big in the Mech Corps, you know? But she befriended us instead and helped us climb up the ranks."

Ves had a good idea what went on now. "I take it that Virma couldn't cover the costs of maintaining a competition mech on her own."

"Right. The scholarship girl couldn't even pay the rent to her apartment in Kelsor. The rest of us had to beg our families in order to increase our allowance in order to cover her expenses."

"Didn't you earn enough from the amateur circuit?"

"Don't you know anything about mech sports?" Raella rolled her eyes. "The only way to break even or make a slight profit is if you pilot a cheap second-hand rust bucket. Unlike those losers who wallow in the bottom of the rankings, my friends and I wanted to compete in front of a crowd of billions. The only way to attract a sponsor and go professional is if you win."

"And the best way you can increase your win rate is if you pilot a good mech." Ves concluded. "I never knew the amateur circuit worked like that. How good were your mechs?"

"Oh, they're pretty decent for currentgen mechs. In fact, I'm bringing my competition mech along. It's a tough little light skirmisher. It doesn't pack a lot of punch, but in my hands I can sever the joints of any mech once I get close."

His niece actually licking her lips as if she still hungered for the taste of blood.

"I'm one of the finishers, you see. Without me, our team would have a hard time finishing off the wounded mechs. I've gotten pretty good at my job."

"There were times when you almost totalled your mech." Melkor suddenly spoke up from the other side of the suite. The visored man smirked.

"Shut up, cuz!" Raella screeched, which scared the cat resting on her lap.

"Oh, don't go baby! Shush now."

Melkor supplement the story. "Dear Raella and her little posse dreamed big. In actual fact, the Witches only performed above average. That's not to say she's bad. The competition in the amateur circuit at Rittersberg is very intense."

Raella obviously disagreed, but she didn't bother quibbling. "We were on the up and up! Everyone thought we'd be able to win over a sponsor in three years or less. We only needed to show we were still growing as a team. Everything went fine! I thought that nothing could stop our rise until Virma signed up with the Silver Chancellors!"

Even Ves had heard of the Silver Chancellors. As one of Rittersberg's premier mech teams, the Chancellors often showed off their prowess in the various leagues throughout the entire Republic. Bentheim often turned into a gigantic circus whenever the Chancellors played a match in one of their arenas.

"Did your team fall apart once your prodigy pilot left?" He asked with a puzzled expression. "Even though you're amateurs, you shouldn't be too far behind, right?"

Melkor suddenly laughed. "Raella never got the chance to prove she could make it without Virma. You see, she only found out about Virma's transfer after finishing their final match of the season. Our fiery little cousin got so worked up about it that she decided that she threw a fist into Virma's face. The arena even broadcasted it live!"

The former mech athlete adopted a sour face. "If I knew they'd tumble me out, I should have added in some kicks. That two-faced bitch could have never made it big without us!"

Obviously, Raella hadn't gotten over her forced retirement from the mech games. Ves couldn't do much to placate her anger. He could only hope that time could heal her wounds. After all, if he wanted to employ her as a guard, she better set her priorities straight.

There was more to life than the mech games. Perhaps a real life conflict might be able to kick her out of her slump. Ves didn't lack for enemies, after all.

Chapter 146 Name

While Ves got to know Raella better, Melkor remained an enigma. Even though he suspected that Raella knew his story, his niece stubbornly shut her mouth when Ves sent out a probe.

"Melkor's story is his own to tell. I don't want to get on his bad side." Raella explained as she shuddered in an exaggerated fashion. "Watch out for the quiet ones."

Throughout the entire trip, Ves only gathered a couple of clues that shed a bit of light on Melkor. First, he hadn't shed the habit of comporting himself as a military officer at the start. He slowly stopped moving around in a rigid fashion when he drew too many eyes. A guard should not attract too much attention, after all.

Second, Melkor never withdrew his visor. Ves almost swore his older cousin even showered and slept with the visor on. Its large but sleek appearance signified its incredible origins. Ves hadn't even seen such a high-end gadget in the Bright Republic.

He wondered what Melkor saw when he constantly donned the visor. Was he constantly looking for threats? Or was he secretly browsing the galactic net like a comm junkie?

In any case, Melkor never appeared to be too distracted, so Ves didn't call him out. Besides his eccentricities, Melkor always followed his instructions.

In contrast, every time he spoke to Raella, she always acted confrontational. Ves had to tread lightly around her in order to avoid setting her off. She still harbored revenge fantasies against Virma, and wasn't afraid to be vocal about it whenever the Silver Chancellors played a match.

"I don't mean to pry, but maybe you should stop watching the mech games." Ves suggested one day. The Greenwind already passed the halfway mark into her journey to Bentheim. "It's not like you can salvage your career."

Predictably, Raella growled at him and left the suite. Ves imagined she intended to vent her frustration in one of the Greenwind's simulator pods.

He knew he hadn't been gentle, but she truly needed a dose of reality. The sporting leagues loved their controversies, but Raella had taken it too far. The sooner she got over this bump in her life, the sooner she could get her head back into the real game. Ves imagined she could be of great use to him once he earned her loyalty.

"On my own, I'm nothing." Ves admitted to himself. Besides Lucky, he was completely at the mercy to anyone who pointed a gun at him. Even if his feline companion could shred through a squad of infantry, Lucky had no way to threaten a mech.

Only mechs could guard against mechs.

One of the reasons why Ves assented to selling a twenty-five percent stake was because he wanted to co-opt some trustworthy mech pilots. Of all the possible people he could entrust his safety, he could never go wrong with family. For all the frequent internal squabbling, the Larkinsons never resorted to the kind of backstabbing Virma had pulled off on Raella and her friends.

Even though he questioned Raella and Melkor's reliability, it didn't change the fact that they shared the same surname. Ves could not imagine in a million years that someone could subvert his own family against him. Against the shadowy influences arrayed against them, trustworthy guards were worth their weight in exotics.

When the Greenwind finally arrived at Bentheim, Ves departed from the ship along with his two companions. The space station's loaders also brought out their personal mechs and temporarily stowed them away.

This time, Ves wanted to conduct some business, so he took a shuttle and descended to the surface. He reached the upscale business district where his mech broker holed up in her lair.

After leaving his escort in the office building's foyer, Ves took the elevator to the top floor where Marcella awaited his arrival.

"Good to see you again, Ves!" The hefty woman greeted him with a smile. She offered him a glass of liquor. "Want a drink?"

"No thanks, I'm here for business." He replied while seating himself across her desk. "I've got a couple of matters to talk about."

She passed him a handful of electronic documents that displayed various bits of performance data. None of his customers employed the Marc Antony Mark II's in an actual battle as of yet, but the results from the various live-fire training exercises spoke for themselves.

"That's some pretty decent performance." Ves contently noted. The mercs who bought his products possessed enough skill to make the most out of its capabilities. "What's their feedback?"

"Their technicians are having a hard time maintaining the internals, but they're making do. Overall, I haven't received any significant complaints. Your buyers are pretty satisfied so far. "

The lack of malfunctions bode well for the Mark II's future. "I'll be busy with a project, so I won't be able to fabricate any mechs for the time being. I plan to hand over the production of silver label mechs to a fabricator I've trained. While he's not as good as me, he work should be able to pass certification, if only barely."

Marcella looked a little sceptical. "I've always heard the Caesar Augustus and its variants are plagued by constant setbacks during the fabrication process. Are you sure you're ready?"

"My fabricator spent months to master my design. I'm pretty confident he's up to the task. Just to be sure, don't start swamping me with orders."

"That won't be a problem. We'll delay the public reveal of the Mark II for the time being. I can use these metrics along with the testimonies from your first batch of customers to drum up some sales."

Ves hammered out a tentative schedule with Marcella. He also allowed her to correspond with Carlos directly in order to handle these minor matters. So long as Marcella regularly provided his business with orders, he'd be able to earn a constant stream of revenue.

"I take it you're not here to talk about the Mark II, right?"

He nodded. "There's also the matter of my ship. How is the Barracuda holding up?"

"She's safely stowed away along with the rest of my inventory. Your pretty corvette is quite a sight, you know. Every time I bring in a customer to deliver their mechs, they always ask me if she's for sale."

They both knew that Ves would be a fool to sell such a remarkable spaceship. "Haha, they can dream. In any case, I'd like to repair and staff my ship."

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Not for the moment, but you never know." He carefully replied. "There may be times where my services are required elsewhere. The ability to move anywhere I want is bound to be useful once I increase my fame."

In fact, he'd been eyeing the missions offered by the Clifford Society for a while now. He never let go of his dream to design an original mech. In order to reach this milestone quickly, Ves planned to amass a lot of merits in order to exchange for a set of quality production machines.

As for the Larkinson family's seed money? Ves already put the 500 million credits aside. When the time came to work on an original design, he intended to spend the money on acquiring the necessary component licenses.

All of this haste was an effort to make himself more valuable once a war broke out. The Mech Corps treated their called-up mech designers differently according to their achievements.

Those who dwelled at the bottom like Carlos could expect to be regarded as disposable cannon fodder. They often assisted the short-handed and overworked mech technicians at major supply points.

Mech designers who possessed practical experience in designing and selling mechs were often assigned as mid-level supervisors.

Only designers who designed an original mech had the opportunity to employ their design talents. The Mech Corps always assigned such valuable minds to one of their many design teams.

Marcella already made the necessary arrangements to repair the Barracuda. He quickly transferred 22 million credits to cover the greedy shipyard's costs and hire some spacers to crew his ship.

"You'll need a captain, pilot, engineer and at least one or two ratings to properly crew your ship. You can't get by with less unless you intend to run your billion credits ship to the ground."

"We'll go by your arrangements since you know better than me. Just make sure you're not hiring a bunch of pirates in disguise."

"Trustworthy spacers are hard to find. You'll have to throw in a lot more money in order to contract a crew who won't cut and run as soon as you encounter trouble."

After a quick discussion, Ves transferred a hundred thousand credits in order to facilitate the hiring process.

"Oh, there's one more thing I'd like to talk about." He said. He sent over a handful of documents his family's lawyers had drafted. "As soon as I get back, I plan to register a corporation. The Larkinsons agreed to purchase a twenty-five percent stake, you see, and I've already waited long enough to incorporate my business."

"That's great news! It's a lot less risky to do business once you move over to a limited liability structure. Are you still selling stock by any chance?"

"Not at the moment." Ves awkwardly laughed. Giving up a fourth of his stock to his family was one thing. He didn't intend to be so generous to outsiders no matter how much a help his mech broker had been. He firmly intended to maintain a cordial relationship with her.

"So what's your question?"

"I've already come up with a logo for my corporation." He replied, and summoned up his familiar emblem of a stylized Lucky sleeping atop a prismatic cloud over a giant V letter. "I'm still grappling with an appropriate name. I've been trying many random names but they don't really roll off the tongue."

His mech broker nodded seriously. "Determining your company's name is one of the most important choices you can make. A bad name won't be much of a drag, but a good name can absolutely be a boon to your marketing."

Under Marcella's guidance, he quickly ruled out several categories of names. For example, he declined to use an acronym unlike the famous BSBH Corporation that operated various popular virtual games like Iron Spirit. He also declined to use a safe but boring name like the Larkinson Corporation or the Cloudy Curtain Mech Corporation.

"Perhaps we're taking the wrong approach." Marcella noted in an exasperated fashion. They'd been at it for half an hour and Ves still hadn't settled on a suitable name. "The name of your company is both an identity and a brand. Think of your products and your future goals. Think of your specialties and selling points. What makes your products different from others?"

Ves leaned back and considered her advice. First of all, he distinguished himself from his competitors with the help of the System. Such a miraculous invention should never come to light, so he quickly decided not to use it as an inspiration for his company's name.

That left his specialties. So far, Ves intended to specialize in both the X-Factor and a balance between speed and armor. The issue with the former was that it couldn't be measured or put in a spec sheet. The issue with the latter was

that he lacked sufficient depth compared with those who fully committed to either speed or armor.

Perhaps he might be overthinking the issue. Ves wanted to build a company that embodied his dreams. What was his ultimate dream?

To reach the pinnacle of mech design! To explore the ultimate limits of a mech! To see whether mechs can come to life!

Life!

His eyes instantly brightened. Could it be so simple? Ves wanted to convey the message that his mechs had life! Even if hardly anyone knew about the X-Factor, the bold aspiration should help convince his customers that his mechs were worth the price.

"I've thought up a name." He said. After repeating the name in his head, he finally decided to air it out in the open. "The Living Mech Corporation, or LMC for short."

The Living Mech Corporation!

Marcella widened her eyes. Despite its fairly plain use of words, the mere idea of producing a mech that could be described as living was a bold one! It already described the indistinct sensation that every customer of his mechs had mentioned to her. His mechs felt more alive than any other ones!

"It's a decent, if somewhat simple name. Are you sure you want to roll with it? It also brings up an unpleasant association with the fantasy of designing a mech composed of living tissue."

Ves firmly held on to his stance. "I'm certain. The name describes my philosophy of treating mechs like persons instead of machines. I don't want my customers to associate my products with commodities to be discarded at will."

Every mech is a life to be treasured!

Chapter 147 Detour

Ves wanted to leave his mark in the Age of Mechs. The Living Mech Corporation encapsulated both his selling points and his aspirations. The name might sound a little bland, but its open-ended meaning left a lot of room for interpretation.

More importantly, the name also matched his nascent design philosophy. No matter how many mech designers had already touched upon the secret of the X-Factor, Ves definitely wished to forge his own path.

After finishing his discussion with Marcella, he left her office and returned to the foyer. Lucky played with a potted plant. Raella and Melkor stood at the side, admiring the promotional footage projected at the sides. They all showed several designs in action. Ves even saw archival footage of the Mark I in action.

"Is that your mech?" Raella curiously asked.

He nodded with pride. "It's my very first sale, in fact. I designed the variant and fabricated it completely on my own. No one else lent a hand to me during the entire process. Recently, I even updated its design. The Mark II is a comprehensive improvement over its predecessor."

His cousins looked suitably impressed. It turned out they hadn't heard about Ves and his accomplishments before. Raella dedicated her entire life to the mech games while Melkor presumably served in some kind of military unit.

Only now, they realized what kind of a bigshot Ves had become. The ability to design and build your own mech impressed the two mech pilots. To them, the entire process sounded like sorcery.

Ves felt as if he was a wizard showing off a fireball in front of a crowd of knights. Though the latter could easily snap the former's body in two, the

impressive display held them back. The wizard's magic had exceeded their limited comprehension.

For the first time since they joined his company, the two regarded him with respect. Raella always wore her emotions on her sleeve, so her mood shifted the most.

As for Melkor, he must have already been acquainted with Ves from reading a report. The visor blocking half his face also hindered anyone from determining his attitude. With the help of his enhanced perception and intelligence, Ves nonetheless picked up some hopeful signs.

"Let's return to the spaceport now. We have a flight to catch."

"Aww, do we have to?" Raella suddenly begged. "This place is a lot livelier than I thought! I want to visit all the mech boutiques and see the local mech athletes in action!"

Though Ves originally planned to depart in a few hours, Raella convinced him to take them for a day out. Perhaps it hadn't been fair for the family to force them to accompany Ves. For privileged city folk like them, a rural planet like Cloudy Curtain must be a boring place to them. Raella especially wouldn't be able to handle the transition.

"Let's head downtown then. The classiest mech boutiques and chain stores can all be found there."

Ves hailed an aircar and the three of them boarded the vehicle. After inputting the address, the vehicle ascended into the air and joined the orderly traffic.

Ves sat in the front holding Lucky while Raella and Melkor sat in the back discussing the merits of Bentheim's local teams.

Raella favored the Velvet Fists, which was Dorum's flagship team. They often clashed head-on against the Silver Chancellors and acquitted themselves

well. The Velvet Fists distinguished themselves by their flamboyant female leader.

As for Melkor, he respected an up-and-coming team called the Grease Monkeys. Based in the heavily industrialized city of Haston, the community-funded team enjoyed a lot of local support. Somehow, they signed on a couple of talented locals and have been making their mark over the years.

"I don't care much about the local teams." Ves replied when Raella asked him who he supported. "Bentheim isn't my home. I spent a lot more time on Rittersberg actually. My real home is Cloudy Curtain. It's just too bad the planet isn't rich enough to fund a team."

They simply didn't have the means. The farming consortiums owned the majority of the planet's wealth. Considering their roots, the last thing they wanted to do was to foster more mechs.

Just as Raella started to explain the merits of her favorite teams, Melkor held up a hand.

"Aren't we supposed to head downtown? Why is our aircar moving away from it?"

His sudden interruption startled Ves. He never paid attention to their environment. When he pressed his face against the window, he found to his dismay that their aircar had inexplicably turned around. Instead of shops and flashing lights, he only encountered drab-looking workshops, factories and warehouses.

"This isn't good! Our car is flying above the industrial district! We're never supposed to come close to this area in the first place!"

Raella instantly pulled out a laser pistol that she previously hid in her coat.

"What the hell? Why is someone after you, Ves? Are we being kidnapped or something?!"

"It might be possible. I never thought anyone would be crazy enough to start something on Bentheim." Ves replied while holding his chin.

Who could it be? Bentheim Liberation Movement? The Five Scrolls Compact? The Gauge Dynasty? The Ricklin Family? Ves provoked too many enemies lately. He couldn't determine who was aiming for him at the moment. He needed more information, but first he had to solve their current crisis.

While everyone still tried to press down their panic, Melkor reached forward and pressed a conspicuous red button. "I don't know much about aircars, but they should all be equipped with a hard override."

The car hadn't changed its course at all. The saboteurs disabled the button.

"What do we do?!" The only female occupant panicked. She held up her comm and tried to contact an emergency service. "My comm is blocked! I can't get a signal!"

"My comm device is blocked as well."

"Hold on! I can fix this, I think!"

Since his last adventures, Ves had gotten into the habit of carrying a miniature toolbox. You never knew when something might need fixing. He retrieved a multitool and quickly separated the console in front of his seat. They encountered a confusing maze of wires and electronics.

"Do you know how to hack this aircar?" Raella dubiously asked.

"I can make sense of some of the components, but I don't specialize in flying vehicles." Ves shook his head. Though he could mess with the autopilot or the altimeter, he could also cause the car to crash. "Lucky, can you take a peek and see if there's anything suspicious inside?"

The cat meowed at at his request and promptly stuck his head inside. His cousins looked a little skeptical at his pet. "Isn't that a mechanical pet? I thought they are supposed to be equipped with low-grade AIs."

"Lucky isn't one of those bottom-bin, mass-produced mechanical pets. He's a lot smarter than any other artificial pet and he also has a few surprises in store."

The gem cat already saved his life more than once. Ves hadn't even mapped his feline companion's full capabilities. After half a minute of sniffing, Lucky suddenly hissed and pawed at an inconspicuous palm-sized backup battery.

"What is this?"

The cat continued to hiss at it as if it killed his ancestors. Ves decided to trust his companion and used a tiny multiscanner to inspect the suspicious object. It didn't take much time before his scanner blared in alarm.

"It's an improvised explosive!"

His announcement landed like a bomb. Raella practically started to foam at the mouth.

As for Melkor, his entire posture radiated fury. He pressed a button on his visor, causing its fluorescent surface to turn from blue to red. He looked around and his expression soured. He retrieved a hidden knife and started to stab the aircar's upholstery.

"What are you up to?"

"There are spy sensors embedded into our seats."

That instantly shut her up. Raella quietly watched him squash the bugs one by one. Meanwhile, Ves continued to scan the improvised explosive in order to determine how much of a threat it posed.

"Haven't you done enough scanning?" Raella asked, her face marred with stress. "Why aren't you pulling it out yet?!"

"It's triggered to blow if I mess with it!"

Besides tampering, the bomb was also set to blow if it received an outside signal. In fact, Ves already activated his Privacy Shield. The invisible spherical field encompassed the bomb, preventing any outsiders from detonating it once they realized their targets became aware of the threat.

It also blocked their kidnappers from sending out their commands to the aircar itself. Ves didn't want to see their vehicle suddenly nosediving to the ground.

Fortunately, the bomb didn't appear to be set to explode once it missed an occasional preprogrammed signal. Bentheim's hyper-vigilant security forces would quickly track a suspicious signal to its source. Ves concluded that his assailants this time must not be too sophisticated.

"It's likely the work of the Bentheim Liberation Movement."

"The separatists? The ones who are always bombing factories and refineries?"

"I'm pretty sure it's them. One of their cadre has a contentious relationship with me. This must be some form of revenge."

"Well, you better fix this quickly before we end up in his grasp!"

Raella had a point. Whoever sabotaged their aircar could have blown them up as soon as they boarded it. Instead, the vehicle quietly redirected their destination to the outskirts of Dorum. Wherever they might end up, it wouldn't be good for any of them. Ves quickly had to ground the car, but before he could do so he first had to solve the bomb.

"I'm already blocking any signals from communicating with the bomb." He explained while heating up a micro plasma cutter. The tiny gadget could

barely cut a thin sheet of metal, and only worked for thirty seconds at its maximum intensity. He simply had to make to. "I've largely figured out its mechanisms. I think I can disarm the bomb by disconnecting this controller and this backup trigger here."

His explanation flew over their heads. "How sure are you that you won't blow us up?"

"I have no idea, really. It depends on how devious the bomb maker is. From what I can gather, he's not a professional. The bomb's construction actually gives me the feeling he's a washed out mech designer."

Such a figure must have studied mech design in the hopes of designing his own mechs, just like Ves. When he finally graduated, he must have found out that a novice mech designer was worth nothing and that the mech industry had no room for him. Such a bitter and frustrated mech designer must be easy pickings for the BLM.

While everyone held their breath, Ves quickly cut through the plating and separated the two essential components. His hand moved with precision as he deftly removed his targets within the thirty second time limit. His micro cutter sputtered out once it expended its charge.

No one moved for a few seconds. Once they realized the bomb hadn't gotten off, everyone sighed. "Let's throw it out!"

Ves nodded in agreement. He used several tools to cut its external cables and separate it from its mounting. After pulling it out, he looked at the aircar's window.

"Lucky, can you open up a hole?"

The cat sprung his energy claws and ruthlessly attacked a window. The claws neatly parted an oval-shaped hole in the car. The vehicle's continued high-

speed flight caused the interior to be engulfed in wind and noise. Ves finally threw out the package, which quickly dropped onto the roof of a warehouse.

"With the state of Bentheim's alertness, I bet the drop has already triggered an alert." Melkor reasoned. "As soon as they take a closer look, they'll know it's a bomb."

Help might be on the way, but the security services still needed some time to catch up with the car. By the time they finally tracked it down, the Larkinsons might already be dead, or worse.

"Enough talk! Ves, please put us on the ground!"

Ves had already started doing so once he threw away the bomb. Lucky hadn't detected any other threats, so Ves went to work with forcing the car to descend. After a minute of rummaging, he found the emergency override.

While the rebels might have tampered with its programming, any standard aircar had to include a functional mechanical override. Such a device should continue to function even if the car had been subjected to jamming, hacking or an electrical overload.

Even the saboteur couldn't do anything about the simple mechanism. The omnipresent sensors around Bentheim constantly scanned each car to see if it still worked.

Without further ado, Ves pulled a lever. The aircar blared an alarm and blinkered its lights before diving down to the streets.

"Get ready for trouble!" Melkor shouted over the howling wind. Both mech pilots readied their pistols and nodded at each other. "As soon as we touch down, we'll try to flee to the nearest shelter and try to hold up until the security forces arrive!"

No one knew if anyone awaited them on the ground, but the Larkinsons never backed down from a fight!

Chapter 148 Cold Wind

The three young Larkinsons disgorged from their forcibly landed aircar in a run. They approached the entrance of what appeared to be a junkyard. A single security officer along with a host of rickety security bots held them up at the entrance.

"Stop! No entry allowed!"

"Let us in! It's an emergency!" Ves retorted as he banged his fist against the gates. "The BLM is after us right now!"

The portly security guard appeared puzzled. He looked around and failed to notice anything amiss. "I don't see any rebels. Are you sure you've got your heads on straight?"

Just as Ves wanted to respond, everyone flattened themselves when a huge explosion threw them off their feet. His antigrav clothing instantly righted his body in place, but his cousins had to roll on the ground before they came to a stop. Everyone gawked at the gigantic plume of smoke a few blocks away.

"We're under attack!" The guard panicked and quickly slammed his fist against a button. The entire junkyard started to go into lockdown as metal shutters rolled down windows and all of the fences became electrified.

"At least let us in before you hole up in your little corner!"

"It's no use." Melkor said and pulled Raella back before she could bang her fist against the metal shutters. "Look around you. Everyone's running scared."

All of the airtrucks and shuttles zipped away, even those who were still in the progress of loading their goods. Some of them even dropped their cargo as their hatches hadn't closed in time.

Along with the retreat of every vehicle, every factory and warehouse started to put up their barricades. In an unsafe environment like the industrial district which was plagued with criminals and other unsavory characters, such an exaggerated level of security was a basic requirement. Even as the air grew a little hotter due to the nearby flames, no one looked out for others.

As the Larkinsons tried to find some shelter at the warehouses and workshops next door, they were only met with stony silence.

"It's no use." Ves eventually said. "This is one of Dorum's worst neighborhoods. A lot of gangs like to threaten and steal from these facilities. You won't be able to find a good samaritan in this part of town."

Melkor frowned behind his glaring red visor. "I don't see any police. How could Bentheim let its public security deteriorate to this degree?"

Even if the Dorum Police Force slept on the job, they should have sent some help over. Ves brought up his comm but only got an invalid signal.

"Our comms are still blocked! The rebels must have sabotaged the nearby broadcast towers!"

Things weren't looking good, Ves thought. A nefarious force had blown up something big and blocked their wireless communication attempts. Had the rebels given up on the quiet option and therefore opted to go loud?

An intense sensation suddenly engulfed him. For some reason, Ves felt as if an apex predator stared hungrily at him. Sweat trickled down his brow as he tried to parse this unfamiliar probe. His so-called Sixth Sense only triggered when he came into contact with the X-Factor.

Did this mean that one of his own mechs was close?

"The flavor is wrong."

For lack of a better word, he described each different sensation from the X-Factor as a flavor. As someone who personally designed and fabricated the Mark I's and Mark II's, they possessed a unique blend of daring and aggression.

The flavor currently pinging his senses lacked the boldness he had personally imbued. Instead, it tasted like a cold winter wind snuffing out a lonely candle.

"VES! GET DOWN!" Melkor suddenly yelled and tried to tackle Ves to the ground. A sudden shield sprang into being that forcibly bounced him back.

Distracted by his attempt to parse his Sixth Sense, his entire vision suddenly bloomed as a solid projectile suddenly crashed against his shield. Master Olson's gift prevented the incredible amount of kinetic energy from affecting his fragile body.

"That's a railgun!" Raella yelled and haphazardly fired her laser pistol in the direction of the attack. "We're all going to die!"

Melkor forcibly bent down her weapon arm so that her deadly laser beams burnt harmlessly against the pavement. "Calm down. Ves didn't die. We can still make it through."

The attack had pulled Ves out of his stupor. He finally realized that his Sixth Sense hadn't picked up a mech, but rather an assassin. His heart beat loudly inside his chest as he belatedly learned he just escaped death. He quickly looked at his comm and had a scare. His shield generator just lost nine percent of its charge!

"Screw it!" He swore, and pointed at the barricaded warehouse they were currently standing in front of. "Lucky, cut down an opening for us."

Lucky didn't act cute this time and directly clawed a crude man-sized opening in the metal shutters. The three along with the cat barged their way inside the

storage area which blared in alarm at their intrusion. Security bots armed with both lethal and non-lethal weapons started to hover over their heads.

"Damn it! These assholes want to shoo us out!" Raella exclaimed and raised her pistol at the robots.

Just as she pulled the trigger, they all lost power and crashed to the ground. The three had to jump away in order to avoid getting pummeled in the heads.

"Melkor?"

"These are ancient models. Even if their firmware is up to date, they're nothing compared to the models used in Rittersberg." The man grinned with satisfaction and tapped his finger against his glowing red visor. "I'm not wearing this for show, you know."

It turned out that Melkor had taken a course in hacking. Though he wasn't a genuine programming expert, he had more than enough skills to apply a standard script to old vulnerabilities. As long as the system wasn't too new or advanced, he'd be able to bypass its lock.

"Why didn't you hack open the doors in the first place, then?"

"It didn't work." He shook his head. "Every property in the block is secured with both mechanical and electronic means."

This wasn't unusual as the people who operated these facilities couldn't afford to update their cybersecurity. Just because Ves could afford to employ Sanyal-Ablin to fortify his systems didn't mean that anyone else could do the same. The cutthroat competition along with all of the other dangers on Bentheim often forced the local businesses to cut corners.

"Is anyone around?"

No one made a peep. Whoever supervised the warehouse must be holing up somewhere safe.

Just as they started to move forward, a loud bang sounded as the sniper shot another round. The projectile punched straight through the warehouse wall and only lost a bit of energy before crashing before the shield that sprung up again in front of Ves.

He just lost another chunk of his shield generator's charge! He only had about eighty percent left!

His cousins didn't even ask about his shield generator. Both Melkor and Raella urged Ves to run towards the middle of the warehouse. "Hurry up and run! The railgun won't be able to penetrate all of these goods."

They all ran towards the stacks of what appeared to be various bulk materials. Ves recognized that most of them were often used in producing mechs, such as titanium and a number of composites.

Just as they reached the middle, they started to hear a large number of footsteps from the entrance Lucky had created.

"Our target's inside!" One of the new entrants announced. "Fan out and shoot the bastard as soon as you see him. Don't forget to call out his position!"

"On it boss!"

"Death to the Republic!"

"Shed Blood for Bentheim!"

The Larkinsons groaned. They recognized the BLM's slogan.

"How many?" Raella asked.

"Twenty-five. They're not wearing armor. No heavy weapons." Melkor slowly analyzed as his visor appeared to see straight through the stored materials.

"We're outarmed and outnumbered. We should surrender."

"No." Ves replied, immediately shutting off this line of inquiry. "The BLM never returns its hostages. Anyone who's taken by them will suffer and agonizing fate. We'll have to fight our way out."

"You heard Melkor. We're vastly outnumbered."

"Those guys must be ruffians. Their sniper is something else, but he's too constrained while we're indoors." Ves explained with burning hope in his eyes.

"You two are mech pilots are you not? You've spent more than a decade learning how to kill. Even without a mech, you should be able to handle some untrained thugs."

"We're not dealing with 'some'. There's twenty-five rebels closing in and we have no way to beat them all!"

"Are you sure about that?"

One reason why Ves insisted on entering a packed warehouse like this was because it contained a lot of vertical space. He turned to Lucky who vigilantly stood at his side and petted his back.

"Go get 'em, Lucky. Don't show them any mercy."

His deadly pet replied with a dangerous yowl and jump up to a shelf above his head. Lucky quickly disappeared from his sight as he instantly entered hunting mode.

A few seconds later, the thugs started to scream. About half of their screams cut off mid-way as if their throats had been cut. The other half

Ves gritted his teeth and pushed his two cousins forward. "We should attack now that they're distracted. I don't know if Lucky can hold on for long."

He always noted that Lucky was never able to sustain his claws for long. Though they possessed an incredible amount of cutting power, Lucky's cat-

sized body could only store so much energy. It also took a fairly long time for his mechanical pet to recharge.

"He's right. The rebels are in disarray. We have to stake our lives for this." Melkor decided and ran towards the direction of the screams.

"W-W-We're really doing this, aren't we?" Raella stuttered for a moment before slapping her head. "What the hell am I doing? I'm better than this! I'm a Larkinson!"

Raella followed after Melkor with Ves closely in tow. He started feeling really guilty for not possessing a weapon. He always intended to purchase one whenever he ended up in situations like this, but always forgot about it after the danger had passed.

Ves resolved to address this shortcoming if he managed to survive. He tried his best to keep up with his athletic niece. "Let me stand in front! My shield can still take a couple of hits."

She didn't argue his decision even if a professional guard would balk at his words. She cleverly positioned her body behind his so that she only exposed her eyes and her pistol.

They passed a couple of brutally savaged bodies of men and women. They all wore dirt-crusted rags but wielded fairly pristine weapons.

"These guys have been hiding in tunnels in order to evade the local security sweeps." Ves remarked as he bent down and picked up a basic but brand-new ballistic rifle. His face quickly soured. "Gene locked. Whoever supplied them with these weapons must have a lot of money in their pockets."

Ves might be able to bypass the gene lock if he kludged up a workaround, but the situation didn't allow it. He discarded the rifle and picked up a plain combat knife. "This will do."

They caught up to Melkor who currently exchanged fire against a pair of thugs. Three bodies lay scorched on the ground. His shooting skills surpassed Dietrich's by a considerable margin as Melkor neatly squeezed a laser beam through a finger-sized slit between two large containers. The rebel screamed as the high-powered beam turned his stomach into a blackened mess.

"My pistol is overheating." Melkor said and turned to Raella with a hand. "Give me yours."

"No way! This is mine!"

"This isn't the time, Raella! You know my marksmanship scores are better than yours, and I can interface my weapons with my visor."

The lack of living opponents lessened their urgency. They all believed the situation had been handled.

"Just hand over the pistol already." Ves commanded his cousin. "We need to clean up these men as quickly as possible before-"

He abruptly stopped when his Sixth Sense started tingling again. He felt another chilling wind blow past his undefinable senses.

"Get down!"

Chapter 149 Pinned Down

The projectile punched through the warehouse's walls from the side and came at them like the wrath of a falling meteor. Forewarned by his Sixth Sense, Ves barely ducked in time, allowing the flaming projectile to impact against against the ground, throwing up a momentous amount of cement.

The large amount of debris pelted the Larkinsons, causing no small amount of minor injuries. Ves managed to stay unscathed due to his shield generator, which lost another percent of charge.

"We've got to pull back!" Melkor gritted his teeth, giving up on trying to borrow Raella's pistol. "As long as that sniper is lurking around, it's not safe to leave the center."

Raella nodded her head as she gripped her own weapon with an iron grip. "We're mech pilots without a mech in sight. We're sitting ducks out here!"

Losing the initiative never went well, but they all agreed and ran back towards the deepest section of the warehouse. All of them tried to find a way out of their predicament but could think of nothing except to wait for help. With the amount of noise the BLM had stirred, the police or Planetary Guard should be arriving at any moment now.

"It's a monster! It's AAAHHH!"

"Some kind of drone is killing us all!"

"I never signed up to this! Let's get out of here!"

The discordant group of rebels broke apart due to the terror in their midst. Lucky reaped a toll on their sanity as he slowly constantly clawed out their throats. At a certain point, the survivors forgot about their mission and fled like rats.

Raella looked at Ves as if he had done the killing himself. "Did you upgrade your cat or something?"

"My father gave him to me as a gift." Ves replied, bringing up his standard excuse whenever someone asked about Lucky's peculiarities. "He's a product of the New Rubarth Empire."

Everything that came from a first-rate superstate might as well be magic. The yokels out in the galactic rim had no cognition of the level of technology employed by most powerful human states. Ves found it to be a convenient prop whenever he had to misdirect the origin of his System's rewards.

"Are you sure you're comfortable with keeping a mechanical pet by your side? They're getting out of vogue because they're prone to hacking."

"I trust Lucky." Ves replied emphatically. In fact, he trusted in the System.

"He's a unique pet who's hiding quite a few surprises. I don't believe anyone from this star sector can compromise his programming."

Moments later, the star of the show appeared in their midst. The tired-looking cat had dropped down from above and meowed with less enthusiasm than before. This time, Ves felt an ache in his heart when he saw that Lucky hadn't come out of fight unscathed. His left side had been scorched by a passing laser beam that blackened his shimmering bronze surface.

"Lucky!" Ves called out and picked up his companion. "Are you okay?"

He tried to interpret his cat's attempts to answer his question. Lucky appeared to have a lot of energy to spare due to the opposition's lack of armor. A simple swipe of his energy claws at their lowest power setting easily took care of the untrained rabble.

Instead, the heat damage partially crippled Lucky's capabilities. A significant part of his flexible shell had fused together into slag. The laser also transferred a lot of heat into Lucky's internals.

Over time, his gem cat could recover from the damage by eating special minerals and letting his advanced self-repair do all of the work. Unfortunately, time was in short supply today.

"So we can't rely on your pet anymore?"

"Seems so. We're on our own."

The news disheartened the Larkinsons. Their best weapon had been taken out of what must have been a stray shot from a panicking rebel.

After some crunching, Melkor finally spoke up. "We're going to have to come up with another plan. The only thing I can't figure out is whether our opponents are committed to investing more assets."

"What do you mean by that, cousin?" The only woman in their midst asked with a reluctant voice. "From all the smoke and fire, the BLM must have blown up an entire refinery or something!"

"Which anyone can do as long as they are smart enough! Only a small cell of terrorists working together with some insiders are required. Think, Raella. How much does this operation cost in their perspective?"

Not much. Besides funding the weapons and explosives, the BLM mainly sacrificed their worthless footmen. The real pros who supplied the weapons along with the expertise to set up a facility to blow were long gone by now.

Melkor turned his ominous red visor to Ves. "Are you certain it's just the BLM who's after us. I'm not doubting your judgement, because everything we've experienced so far matches up with your guess. Only the railgun specialist doesn't fit. His weapon is too sophisticated and his aim is spot on. You already died twice, you know."

It hadn't really set in, but Ves knew he brushed past certain death. He mentally thanked his master for her very timely gift.

"I know what you're talking about. To be honest, I've provoked other enemies besides the BLM. All of them are incredibly wealthy."

"That's great." Raella sarcastically remarked. "It might have been nice to tell us how many people you pissed off BEFORE we get shot at!"

Before the argument escalated, Melkor held out his hand. "Stop. More men are approaching. There are fewer steps, but they're heavier than the last wave."

"Is it the police?"

"I don't know yet. I'm not familiar with Dorum's fast response force."

Everyone readied their weapons for another fight. If the newcomers came with ill intent, they'd fight tooth and nail to save their lives. Ves petted Lucky's head. "Can you take a peek? Just tell us if it's friendly or not."

The cat meowed softly before patting away with a much less slinkier gait. While Lucky scouted out the approaching group, Ves looked around the warehouse and tried to spot anything that might help in turning the tables.

Sadly, the shelves only held low-value bulk materials that wouldn't be of much help. Ves found nothing remotely volatile or flammable, and he couldn't even find an industrial loader mech that normally carried heavy loads.

With nothing at hand, Ves hesitated in bringing up his comm. He could still resort to the System if nothing else. With almost 10,000 DP in reserve, he could buy a gadget from the stingy Store and hold on for a couple more minutes.

Lucky quickly returned and yowled with panic. Melkor also finished parsing his visor's readings. "We're dealing with armored mercenaries or the like. We won't be able to overcome their armor with our pistols."

Laser pistols worked extremely well against soft targets, but had difficulty penetrating past a solid layer of armor. As long as the armor was thick enough, it diffused the heat among its surrounding portions.

"This is ridiculous!" Raella cursed and held her weapon ready. "Where's our help? We've been under fire for over ten minutes now."

While Melkor tried to form a plan, Ves turned his body and discretely activated his comm. While the BLM disabled communications, they couldn't do anything to his apps. He tapped the System's icon and entered its Store.

Millions of items flashed by in a blink as the Store came into being. Ves tried to figure out the best way to spend his DP. He didn't ask for much, just a way to survive. The life-threatening situation disrupted his thoughts, making it harder for him to think. He couldn't employ his logic when all of his primal instincts activated his fight or flight response.

"Come on, System! Please help me out. Give me a suggestion of what I should buy!"

[The Mech Designer System is not meant to replace the user's own judgement. Please treasure your autonomy and make your own decisions in life.]

Ves felt the urge to scream. This stubborn System still stuck to its stupid principles when his life was at danger. He couldn't rely on anyone but himself it seemed. He quickly considered where he should spend his points.

"A weapon is no good. They'll kill me before I can kill them. Armor will only delay the inevitable."

He quickly concluded that he should obtain some means to avoid the enemy entirely. He first thought of teleporting, but he quickly balked at the prices the various teleportation items offered. Unless he accumulated more than a million DP, he shouldn't be thinking about teleporting himself and his cousins.

"What about a way to hide?"

A permanent or durable way to hide still cost way too much, but the Store offered several one-use alternatives. For example, he could spend 5.000 DP for a temporary augment of his Privacy Shield.

[Comm Upgrade - Privacy Shield - Level 1 - One-time Augment - Full Stealth]

Price: 5.000 DP

Duration: 10 Minutes

Temporarily upgrades a level 1 Privacy Shield to emit an overpowering field that disrupts any means of observation. It is capable of obfuscating every possible means of observation that is known to the Mech Designer System.

The simple description didn't do the augment justice. It blocked both electronic and biological means of detection. As long as no one bumped into their bodies, they could sneak off under the noses of their hunters.

Heavy footsteps started to become audible. The mercenaries entered the warehouse and started to fan out into two separate groups.

Ves gritted his teeth and purchased the augment. "Everyone, come close to me. Best to hold on to my body, front and back. I've got a gadget here that can hide us from their view."

His cousins didn't doubt his words witnessing his shield generator. They knew he visited Leemar and returned with a lot of high-tech gifts. Melkor stood in front while Raella pressed against his back. Lucky on the other hand jump on his owner's shoulders.

"How long will it last?" Melkor asked in a whisper.

"It's supposed to be no more than ten minutes."

Both of his cousins were taken aback. Full stealth for an entire hour? Such a powerful piece of technology shouldn't even be available in this backwater star sector! Ves didn't try to convince them any further and activated both his Privacy Shield and his newly purchased augment.

He felt sick at the thought of bidding farewell to 5.000 DP. He could have upgraded a lot of skills with those precious points!

At least he saved them up beforehand. If he had already splurged his entire savings beforehand, he wouldn't be able to avoid the approaching killers.

Melkor and Raella both tried to say something, but the Privacy Shield dampened every sound. They could still see each other but those outside the bubble would see nothing but empty space. Seeing that they couldn't talk, Melkor tugged Ves into moving away from their current hideout.

They had started moving just in time, as ten seconds later a grenade landed where they had just been standing. The strange metal cylinder exploded in a white-hot glow of plasma that instantly scorched the fleeing Larkinsons with a flash of excruciating heat. It was a good thing the Privacy Shield dampened all of their sounds, because everyone except Ves released a cry.

Raella had it worst as she stood behind Ves. Her skin started to well up in red as they desperately fled the scene before the mercs decided to throw some more grenades.

In their frantic flight, they almost managed to collide with a squad of professional-looking mercenaries. They quickly pushed to the side and let the menacing squad trudge forward with their deadly rifles aimed at various angles.

Even as they stood mere meters away, the Larkinsons hadn't been spotted by the mercs. Ves released a breath. The System hadn't swindled him. The one-time augment worked like a charm.

With little more than eight minutes left to go, they quickly resumed their awkward run. No one knew how long they had to hold out, but anywhere was better than here.

Chapter 150 Man Against Machine

Using the souped-up Privacy Shield, they exited the warehouse through the hole Lucky had cut at the beginning. They left the heavily-armed mercs behind as they spread out and tried to track their targets down. From their cussing and swearing, they hadn't expected Ves and his cousins to disappear in thin air.

During their clumsy flight to somewhere safe, Ves felt a chilling wind brush past his Sixth Sense. Every time, the feeling went away, but it still frightened him to no end. Could the sniper use his own senses to suss their bodies?

The wind suddenly spiked!

The streets suddenly boomed as a railgun projectile rocketed towards their previous location. The entire pavement cratered as the solid slug delivered an incredible amount of kinetic energy. Anyone hit by it directly would have no chance of survival.

The Larkinsons quickly dashed away!

Ves remembered the description of the stealth augment. Its open-ended description didn't explicitly say that the temporary upgrade could block someone's metaphysical senses. Ves always suspected the reason why the System steered him into studying the X-Factor was because it didn't have much of a clue how it worked as well.

It might be one of the reasons why the Skill Tree excluded any mention of the X-Factor. Even if others figured out some clues, no one had laid down a systemic path to understanding this nebulous field of study.

In fact, the Skill Tree actually lacked a couple of other skills that should have been there. Ves had noted that some of the more advanced specialties pioneered by many famous masters hadn't been included.

For now, he urged the group to continue running past some blocks. Melkor appeared to guide them all towards a security checkpoint of some sorts. The small one-story structure usually staffed by a handful of police officers.

Now, they only saw death and ruin. The place had been torn up with bullet and scorch marks. The bodies of the fallen police officers were left behind like discarded trash.

Ves looked down on his comm. They only had four minutes left before the stealth augment ran its course. After looking around, he spotted something interesting. Right across the street, a massive storage area took up an entire block.

It must have been the place where larger shuttles and transports deposited heavy containers before ground-based transports picked them up and delivered them to their final destinations.

He ignored the large stacks of containers and instead turned his gaze towards the half-dozen industrial loader mechs standing off to the side. Their operators probably parked them to the side once the alarms went off before running away to safety.

"Look over there." He said, but quickly remembered that the stealth field dampened his voice. Instead, he tapped their shoulders and pointed at the mechs.

They both understood his intentions. Raella looked skeptical but Melkor nodded in understanding. They crossed the street and stopped before the storage yard's sturdy gates. With another prompt, Ves got Lucky to slice a narrow opening. Once they entered the yard, Ves suddenly felt the cold wind return.

The sniper must have noticed the sudden cut as soon as his Privacy Shield moved away!

With its stealth charge about to run out, they all ran towards the industrial mechs. Compared to combat-oriented mechs, the industrial mechs emphasized cost savings and strength. They were mostly designed to be an affordable way to carry heavy loads of goods without relying on expensive heavy-duty lifter platforms.

An industrial mech might cost more upfront, but a lifter platform guzzled energy like an alcoholic stuck in a wine cellar. The limbs also offered very fine manipulation when needed.

The ones employed by the storage yard weighed heavier than medium mechs and featured very robust limbs. They might not be able to outrace an aircar, but their heavy arms and legs allowed them to lift hefty loads without straining their frame.

The stealth field fizzled out just as they reached the lifter cables that could bring them up to the cockpits. "It's out! We're exposed now. Melkor, can you hack into these mechs?"

"I should be able to, but I might need your help. Sometimes, the owners of these low-quality mechs

Raella rapped her knuckle against the scratched and dirty surface of one of the machines. "Are we really going to hijack an industrial mech? They don't even have neural interfaces, let alone armor that is able to withstand an infantry-grade railgun!"

"If you can point out an actual combat mech, then be my guest!"

That quickly shut her up. Melkor quickly put his foot down on a step, which promptly zipped up the cable until he reached the cockpit. The step then climbed down, allowing Ves to follow after his older cousin.

For now, it appeared the sniper hadn't caught up to them yet. Ves quickly squeezed inside the narrow cockpit and analyzed his surroundings. The omission of a neural interface meant that the cockpit offered a lot more manual controls. He didn't bother figuring out what they did and instead tried to find out how to force the mech online.

After some fiddling, Melkor spoke out. "I've cracked the digital codes, but the mech isn't turning on. The owners of the mech must have installed some kind of hardware lock!"

Ves took over at that point. He swept the consoles until he found a plain mechanical lock underneath the main screen. Using an old-fashioned lock and key was a fairly easy way to secure an industrial mech. It prevented them from being taken for a joyride at the very least. Even a mech technician could install something as simple as this setup.

He forced open the lock in thirty seconds. Such a simple mechanism didn't faze him in the slightest. As the mech started booting up, the two Larkinsons descended using the same stepper cable.

"Raella, take this mech and stand guard for us!"

"On it!"

The woman zipped up the cable and entered the booting mech.

"You better get inside your own mechs before they catch up!" The hatch in front of the torso quickly closed up. It gave her a measure of safety against a railgun attack, though Ves doubted its worthless armor could withstand such a strike.

"They're already on their way." Melkor grimly replied as Ves and him climbed inside the cockpit of another mech. "We won't have time to unlock a third mech, so get yourself comfortable Ves."

Even if he could, Ves had no doubt he'd probably trip his mech. Even industrial mechs needed a fair amount of training before anyone could pilot them proficiently. An untrained norm like him had no business trying to turn one into a hazard.

After they both disabled the various locks, they settled in as best they could in the cramped space. Ves had to squeeze to the side in order to provide Melkor enough room to operate the industrial mech.

The screens showed various settings that Melkor efficiently tweaked to his liking. Once he finished his modifying its settings, the lumbering mech finally started to move.

Raella had already turned her mech towards the incoming enemies. The same mercenaries who tried to corner them in the warehouse had tracked them down to the storage yard. A large number of hard-faced thugs armed with rifles and pistols followed after the heavily armed mercs.

"Look at that mech! It's moving!"

"They're inside!"

"Shoot the rust buckets!"

While the mercs slinked off to the sides, the thugs simply dove to the nearest cover and started to shoot their guns at the industrial mechs. Most of their weapons simply plinked or seared the surface of their mechs.

Ves gripped arm handle of the cockpit's seat. The amount of weapons arrayed against them could chew up an entire crowd of people. Yet nothing happened other than scratching their mech.

Even if their borrowed machines didn't incorporate any exotics in their armor, they still came out largely unscathed.

The Larkinsons finally fought back. The mob of separatists started to grow apprehensive as the two hijacked mechs moved close. Raella's mech adopted a strange gait that pushed her mech past its maximum speed. Only a truly skilled pilot could manipulate their mech's limbs in this fashion. Though it also strained the machine, it wasn't like they owned it in the first place.

As Raella closed in, Melkor hung back with his own mech and grabbed a nearby crate of goods.

His mech threw the crate at the shooting mob. Somehow, the crate landed in the very middle of the crowd, splattering four people instantly.

Raella's mech almost tripped due to her shock, but she recovered quickly and reached the closest concentration of men. Her mech grabbed a nearby pipe from a whole stack of them and started wielding it like a blunted spear.

Even as Melkor continued to throw all kinds of junk at the frightened mob, Raella bashed her closest assailants into broken wrecks. Her mech wielded the pipe like a lumbering oaf. Even if she couldn't wield the weapon as fast as she liked, she still reaped a horrible toll due to the incredible power behind each swing.

A railgun suddenly fired at her. Ves had no warning this time, as the sniper hadn't aimed at the mech he holed up. The railgun burrowed straight through Raella's mech, boring a small but nasty hole through its torso. The projectile narrowly missed the cockpit due to her amazing reflexes.

The single hit slowed down her mech by twenty percent.

"We've got to take care of that sneaky shooter!" She yelled as her mech practically went berserk. Her machine moved like a drunken fatty as she employed her piloting skill to the utmost in an attempt to make it harder for the sniper to hit her cockpit. Her dented pipe battered a lot of rebels to death. Their morale and enthusiasm started to waver.

The sniper shot her mech again, this time pummeling its leg. The mech lost most of its meager nimbleness as the mech had been forced to its knees. Its damaged leg couldn't handle much weight.

"We're getting chipped to death! How long do we have to wait?!"

"Help should be coming at any moment!" Ves remarked as he looked at the time. "Even if the rest of Bentheim is in flames, they should still send out a squad of mechs by now!"

Melkor's cockpit started to beep out an alarm. A squad of mercenaries sneaked up to their rear and launched about a dozen plasma grenades at his mech's vulnerable rear. The industrial mech could never dodge in time to avoid getting burned.

His mech started to turn its torso while whipping out its arm holding a crate of minerals. Half of the grenades hit the arm or crate, causing it to be engulfed in several balls of fury that crippled the entire limb.

The remaining grenades either missed the mech or pelted its torso. Melkor's mech hitched up as its power lines received a lot of disruptions.

The mercenaries started to poke out of their cover and fired at the holes created by the grenades. Their powerful weapons were capable of dealing significant damage to the industrial mech's internals. Melkor turned his mech away from the incoming fire as best he could, but the mercs had cleverly encircled them in order to negate such a move.

The industrial mechs fared poorly against the infantry dismantling them piece by piece. A fire broke out in the lower torso of Raella's mech, while Melkor's hijacked mech showed diminishing power as the incoming fire pummeled its internals into junk.

Just as they started to lose hope, a trio of mechs suddenly landed in their midst. Both the mercs and the surviving mob lost their footing as their landing threw off minor shockwaves.

All of the aerial mechs that landed sported the black-and-blue checkered pattern of the Bentheim Planetary Guard. The mechs were kitted out with a shield and a specialized fluid projector that looked like a flamethrower.

"PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS NOW!" A Guard mech boomed out. "THIS FIGHT ENDS HERE!"

Everyone on foot tried to run. As if expecting this response, the guard mech fanned out in three directions and activated their fluid projectors.

A disgusting-looking slime shot out of their nozzles and engulfed the fleeing men. Two of the Guard mechs continued to engulf every fleeing combatant. Even if they had a head-start, they could never outpace a building-sized combat mech.

The final mech didn't chase after the rats but instead walked towards Raella's half-burning mech. Her projector ejected a fire suppressant that stopped the flames. It then turned to Melkor's mech.

"I'm sorry about the late response. I hope you're not too banged up."

"Melinda?!"

The Larkinsons finally put down their guard. Their own cousin arrived to save the day. With her mech standing guard, the sniper probably wouldn't have the opportunity to shoot again.

"Better late than never. Thank you for saving us."