

Chapter 151 Aftermath

The sky over Bentheim never slept. Even at night, millions of aircars, shuttles and other vehicles roamed the invisible lanes above the metropolis of Dorum. Ves looked up at the busy traffic at an office in the middle of a Planetary Guard base.

"This is not how I envisioned my first assignment." Raella muttered as she scratched her back. Her back had been raked with debris when a railgun strike barely missed. Fortunately, the Guard medics easily treated her wounds, though they still stung like hell. "How many enemies have you made?"

Even Ves didn't know. He still found it hard to believe that someone might actually wish to kill him due to some trivial offense. Of course, what he found trivial might not be so small to whoever arranged the attack. While the attempt obviously involved the much-maligned Bentheim Liberation Movement, he found it to be a little too sophisticated to pin the blame on the rebels alone.

"We're going to have to adopt some tighter security protocols from now on." Melkor said as he crossed his arms. "Guard duty has always been a hazardous assignment, but the risks we're exposed to is beyond all reason."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure to remunerate you properly. You won't be making a loss under my employ."

Ves didn't wish to scare his cousins away. He could already see the doubt in their expression. As long as he offered enough compensation, then they wouldn't cut and run.

He also didn't hold back on his mistakes. "The biggest mistake we've made is that we haven't brought our mechs along. Everyone took for granted that we'd only stay on Bentheim briefly, so we left them in their containers to be shipped

to Cloudy Curtain. I made the decision because it was the most efficient choice, since I only expected to stay in Bentheim for a day."

"You're going to need a permit if you want to pilot a mech in a heavily populated area. It's almost impossible to get one these days. They're exceedingly rare in Rittersberg and I don't expect any different here in Bentheim." Melkor pointed out.

Anyone could flatten an entire neighborhood with a single mech. Ves looked down at the streets and spotted only a dozen mechs or so. The vast majority of them sported the black-and-blue Guard colors. The rest used corporate colors as they escorted the aircars of senior executives.

"I got an answer for that." The front door slid open. Melinda entered the lounge with a smirk.

Besides Raella, everyone possessed the same raven hair that marked them as a Larkinson. She walked over to Ves and handed over a datapad.

"What's this?"

"Your grandpa's present. I contacted him as soon as I learned how much trouble you stirred." She looked at Ves as if he was a delinquent. "It's a good thing he's willing to bail you out. Bentheim will cover some of the costs. Whatever insurance the affected businesses fall under will cover another part. Grandpa will shoulder the rest."

The Larkinsons along with their pursuers did a number on the warehouse and storage yard. Though the Planetary Guard declared that they had been acting in extreme self-defense, that still left them open to getting sued by angry businessmen with damaged goods in their hands.

Ves read the official document on the datapad. He realized he received a permit to travel around in most of Bentheim with a restricted mech escort. He could only employ one mech, and it had to adhere to a strict guideline of

loadouts. For example, carrying a flamethrower in an urban area was asking for trouble.

The permit came as a timely gift. "This is extremely helpful. Did you vouch for me, Melinda?"

"Yup." She nodded and looked around for Lucky. She spotted the disheartened-looking cat and bent down to pet his undamaged surface.

"Frankly, the Planetary Guard is too short-handed right now and we can hardly spare the manpower to keep an eye on you whenever you drop by for a visit. I didn't need to do much convincing, though. The Larkinsons name is good enough."

It paid to be known as a Larkinson. Though some of the rival families disparaged their reputation, the Larkinsons have never acted excessively for several hundred years.

"Alright. I'll be sure to make use of this permit the next time I visit this planet. How's the interrogation going?"

Melinda's smirk turned into a frown. "Difficult as usual. The groundside component of the BLM largely consists of petty criminals and disillusioned workers. I doubt they can count past ten. The handful of cadre have already fled their underground bases by the time we obtained their locations."

The BLM drew their ranks from the large mass of low income workers. They worked hard and earned only a pittance. When the rebel propagandists pointed out that the Bright Republic siphoned away a large portion of the planet's revenue, the workers easily swayed over to their mindset.

"What about the mercenaries? Their gear is way too sophisticated."

"It's a dead end. They've been conditioned into killing machines. The details of their mission has been physically scrubbed from their brains. They're probably

dark mercenaries who've been kidnapped and brainwashed into becoming untraceable pawns."

In the end, the Planetary Guard found nothing. The whole affair had been dismissed as a failed attempt at kidnapping and assassination by the Bentheim Liberation Movement.

"Are we free to go now, Melinda?"

"Sure. Don't forget to retrieve your gear before you go."

"Ah, one more thing cousin. Do you know a place where I can buy a good pistol?"

Everyone turned to Ves. Raella laughed at him. "Are you sure you want to play with a gun?"

While Melinda, Raella and Melkor hadn't been trained as infantrymen, their mech pilot training didn't skimp out in these areas. Mech pilots had to keep their body in shape and engrave their fighting skills into their muscle memory in order to make the most out of their mechs.

"I'm not looking for an expert's gun." Ves replied while raising his hands as if he was a naughty child who wanted to take a shuttle out for a joyride. "I just want something that can play a role in the hands of an amateur like me."

While Ves received some firearms training when he studied mech design, he couldn't call himself an expert. It took talent and perseverance in order to become a proficient marksman. He didn't delude himself into thinking a few dozen hours of practice turned him into a commando.

"Do you have money?"

He thumped his chest with his palm. "Who do you think you're talking to? I'm a mech designer!"

"Hmmm." Melinda tapped her chin with her finger. "You should pay a visit to Old Jimmy's. It's a classy place that tailors their weapons to their customers. They also offer smart guns that offer a variety of conveniences such as aim assistance. As long as no one hacks your gun, you're good to go. The only problem is that they take weeks to fulfill an order."

The place sounded like a good fit for him, though he lacked the time to wait. "I'll settle for a generic weapon for now."

Everyone left and headed downstairs. They retrieved their comms and weapons and left for the spaceport under the watchful company of a pair of mechs. Ves had the feeling that the Planetary Guard was glad to see him go.

They paid extra for an immediate passage to Cloudy Curtain. The Larkinsons still had to spend the night at a hotel before they took a shuttle to the space station and boarded their transport.

Three days later, they finally Cloudy Curtain. As their shuttle touched down at the rural planet's old and shabby spaceport, Ves took a deep breath of his home planet's air.

"Home sweet home. I can finally get back to work."

"Hopefully we left most of the craziness behind." Raella remarked, though she quickly sneered at Orinoco's pathetic skyline. "Hopefully there's some entertainment to be found in this place."

In contrast, Melkor maintained his vigilance. His blue visor neatly scanned every corner of the spaceport. "This place is more than fifty years old. Its security could use an update. Do we need to watch out for anyone on this planet?"

Ves grimaced at the question. "Some of the local politicians have a beef with me. They're not as powerful and unscrupulous as the BLM, but they're certainly bad news."

They didn't have permission to pilot a mech in Cloudy Curtain, though hardly anyone bothered to ask for it. Walter's Whalers frequently showed off their mechs without a permit. While Ves was tempted to ignore the local laws and have his cousins unpack their mechs, he didn't wish to give more ammunition to his enemies.

Instead, he compromised by renting a reinforced shuttle from Sanyal-Ablin. Ves spent the rest of the trip explaining what he learned about the White Doves and the Greens and what they should watch out for. Most of all, he emphasized his relationship with Walter's Whalers.

"Aren't you afraid they'll bite the hand that feeds them one day?" Melkor asked with a warning in his voice. "Gangs like these normally don't last very long. Once they fall, their patrons fall with them. You know our family doesn't like to associate with these kinds of people."

"This isn't Rittersberg. The Larkinsons have no influence here. I might not have much in common with the Whalers, but we share some interests. That's enough to trust their sincerity."

Though Melkor found it to be a bad idea, he didn't argue the point. Ves ran the show now. He could make all the bad decisions he wanted as long as he was willing to suffer the consequences.

Once they touched down at his workshop, everyone sighed in relief. His workshop's sturdy walls, menacing turrets and state-of-the-art security bots certainly impressed his cousins.

"This setup must cost quite a lot."

"Not as much as hiring a mech to stand guard. That's what you two will be in charge of." Ves noted with a firmer voice now that he returned to his home. "I don't expect you two to stand guard at all times, but you should at least be

ready to enter a mech to respond to emergencies. I'll let the two of you arrange the details yourself."

The previous attack should have made it clear that Ves faced very real threats. He could at least count on Melkor to be dutiful enough to take his job seriously. With both of them watching over Raella like hawks, she wouldn't be able to drag her feet either.

"Anyone home?!"

Carlos quickly arrived. Since the time Ves departed for Rittersberg, his friend grew a beard. It made him look a little more mature, though Ves had to grow used to the new look.

"Let me introduce you to my cousins. They're both qualified mech pilots and will hopefully be patrolling around with their mechs."

"Oh, nice to meet you guys!" His fabricator smiled and shook their hands. They babbled a bit but found out they shared nothing in common besides their interest for mechs. Instead, he turned back to his employer. "Boss, I did it! I practiced hard while you left and managed to crank up my success rate to ninety-nine percent!"

"That's great news!" The ratio relieved Ves. Carlos hadn't been slacking off. "I already made the arrangements with my mech broker. You'll be in charge of fulfilling orders for the silver label Mark II's from now on. For now, I'll supervise your work closely."

Once Carlos proved his mettle, Ves intended to let him work without hovering over his shoulder like an overprotective mother. He had his own projects to take care of, the most immediate of which awaited his attention for quite some time.

As his cousins slowly settled in, Ves started to deal with his paperwork. He called Calsie for a meeting. Ves was bound to make a fool of himself if he

approached the local government himself. Calsie should certainly be able to help with applying for a mech permit and registering a corporation.

"I'll prepare the groundwork in the evening." She chirped over her comm.

"Good. See you tomorrow then."

Chapter 152 Allure of Mechs

Ves met with Calsie the next morning and discussed a lot of business. She spent most of her efforts preparing to apply for a mech permit. Such a thing might be hard to obtain for a private individual, but as soon as he incorporated his business he'd be able to take advantage of looser provisions.

As for registering his business, his family's lawyers already laid the groundwork. Calsie only had to dress it up and rearrange some data in order to comply with the local standard.

"It's not that difficult to start up a corporation in the Bright Republic. Even the local politicians can't be too excessive." She explained to her employer.

"Cloudy Curtain is relatively rare among rural planets in that it doesn't offer any incentives for doing so. Most underdeveloped planets do their best to attract more commerce."

"That's fine. I don't expect any favors nor do I need any. As long as we don't encounter any obstacles, I'm content."

After she promised to handle the filing and registration, they turned to a thornier subject. With the Planetary Assembly about to go back in session, the tax reform bill became a looming threat to Ves. If the White Doves and the Greens succeeded in imposing excessive demands to businesses like the Living Mech Corporation, then Ves would be forced to relocate his assets.

"The assemblymen have been busy trading favors. They've added in a lot more exemptions to the people who are willing to play along with the ruling

coalition. Opposition is too scattered right now. Whoever is left out is of no importance to Cloudy Curtain's economy."

Calsie regularly reported her observations, so Ves already knew about it. "So there's no use in trying to unite. We're not part of their network."

It galled him a bit that the politicians treated him like an insect. They didn't need to take his opinions into account when they formulated their policies. Well, he'd show them up sooner or later.

"The coalition is doubling down on boosting the agricultural sector. They're even drafting a complimentary bill that will indirectly subsidize the consortiums along with the other farming concerns. Normally, the ruling coalition wouldn't be able to make this pass, but with the Bright Republic preoccupied with the terror attacks and the impending war, a small case of self-enrichment doesn't really ping on their radar."

They truly picked the best timing. Having first-hand experience of a terror attack on his own had made Ves aware that the Republic were at their wits end. They had to devote a huge amount of manpower in order to keep a lid on the BLM.

Ves turned his palm to her. "I understand you've been working on a plan. Let's hear it. I've been racking my brain myself but I haven't figured out a way to stop the coalition."

She twirled her straight blond hair and smirked at him. "You haven't been spending much time in town, have you?"

"If I'm not holed up in my workshop, I'm often off-planet."

"Then you aren't aware of today's sentiment. If you walk down the streets of Freslin, you'll note that you've become a local celebrity of sorts, especially among the young. While no one really knows what mech designers actually do, it doesn't change that you're Cloudy Curtain's very first mech

manufacturer. Your physical mechs might be unattainable to the masses, but your virtual mechs have made quite a splash."

His virtual mech sales had indeed increased lately, though not to the point of earning him lots of DP. His popular 3-star Young Blood stopped providing him with DP, while his other designs only modestly sold more.

Still, it didn't change that more potentates piloted his mechs. According to Calsie, his brand recognition had grown to the point where at least half of the people on the streets knew his name.

She continued her story. "Once I started hearing your name being bandied about by my fellow students, I suddenly had a thought. What kind of era are we living in these days? This is the Age of Mechs!"

Ves scrunched his face. "Huh?"

"You've lived a fairly privileged life, so you've been able to pursue a career with mechs without a problem. What about the rest? Do you know how much the local youths worship mechs? Everyone is a fan of mechs! However, not many people are able to get in touch with one. After the local potentates graduate from the junior academy, they're often forced to move off-planet or abandon their piloting career!"

Cloudy Curtain only hosted a handful of grassroots academies that only offered a limited curriculum. If potentates wish to develop their skills to the point of becoming a qualified mech pilot, they often had travel to a different planet in order to attend a more advanced academy. Not everyone could afford to do so.

Slowly, Ves started to understand her point. "I see what you mean. My sudden entry into Cloudy Curtain is a portent to a livelier mech scene. A single mech manufacturer can function as the central node of a nascent mech community. All the mech fans should be thankful of me for opening this door."

"Do you know which organization is the most popular among the young? It's actually the Whalers! They're the only game in town with lots of mechs. They also recruit heavily among the locals. This is why they've never lost support even if they've made a nuisance of themselves over the years. They're our very own folk heroes!"

In other words, even if the politicians detested them, they would never dare to chase them away. First, they couldn't beat them on the battlefield because the Whalers had way too many mechs, even if their quality left much to be desired.

Second, the Whalers were actually more popular than the Greens, White Doves and the Pioneers put together. Cloudy Curtainers generally never bothered with politics because it was boring as hell. In contrast, Walter's Whalers constantly flaunted their exploits with mechs. Ves had to admit that Mr. Walter acted very shrewdly by being so flamboyant.

"So you think we should adopt the same strategy as the Whalers? That sounds very expensive."

Even if most people knew he existed, that didn't mean anything on its own. Turning this awareness into action required a lot work. A publicity campaign could easily run into the billions of credits.

Still, Calsie kept her confident smile as she passed him a datapad that outlined her plan. Ves quickly skimmed over the documents. It contained two ambitious motions that could turn the tables on the rotten politicians who wanted to drive him away.

"As you can see, my outline calls for applying pressure to the ruling coalition from both the top and bottom. Pressure from any one direction won't affect them too much, but if they have to fight on multiple fronts, they'll be starting to feel the squeeze."

"I see that your first plan calls for partnering up with the gaming centers."

In order to play the best mech sims, potentates had to use an extremely expensive simulator pod. Gaming centers offered a convenient place for potentates to practice their skills without saddling them up with loads of debt. Most of the local gaming centers were actually franchises of established entertainment companies.

"Right." She nodded. "The most popular game at the moment is Iron Spirit. It turns out it offers an extensive set of privileges to game center operators. Every establishment has the right to designate a handful of mechs at each star tier as their trial mechs. Pilots are able to try them out without limit even if they haven't purchased them. This is a great way for you to become an indispensable figure to the young."

"What about the operators? Will they agree to such an arrangement?"

Calsie leaned over and called up an appendix. "I've already made a call to all of the game centers in Orinoco and Freslin. About a third of them are willing to put your Young Blood as a promotional mech. As for the others, they're not allowed to decide this on their own. Still, if they see that the game centers that are promoting your models are doing well, they might start to change their mind."

Her initiative really came as a welcome surprise. He hadn't expected her to sound out so many game centers. It must have cost a lot of time to canvas so many operators. "If this is true, then we're off to a great start. Still, that doesn't mean much on its own."

"Oh, we still need to do a publicity campaign, but it doesn't cost much if we limit our reach to the game centers. Once you tell your fans that some evil backstabbing politicians are trying to drive you away, they'll cry to their

mommies and daddies. Once this phenomenon reaches a certain point, the adults can't sit still. After all, most of them also appreciate mechs."

The most popular broadcast on Cloudy Curtain consisted of the mech games. Almost a quarter of the population regularly tuned into the live matches.

While the plan still sounded nebulous at certain points, Ves approved of the plan. He allowed Calsie to draw a limited amount of funds in case she needed to grease the wheels. He also tasked her with forming up a publicity campaign. She intended to leave the work to her friends who studied Marketing.

If the first prong of the plan intended to poke the masses, the second prong was definitely meant to poke something bigger. As Ves read the second set of documents, his brow rose in alarm.

"You actually want to petition the Republican Commissioner? Are you insane?"

Major planets such as Bentheim hosted a substantial amount of bureaucracy that answered directory to the central government in Rittersberg. A backwater like Cloudy Curtain wasn't entitled to such treatment. The low population and stagnant economic growth only led to the establishment of a single office.

While the Republican Commissioner reported directly to Rittersberg, he mainly supervised the local governmental organs. In extreme cases he could fire the entire Planetary Assembly and rule the entire planet by decree, thought that never happened.

"Think of the Bright Republic's plight." She responded patiently. She turned on her comm and visited a random news portal. "Look at the headlines. Half of them are talking about the war that everyone is convinced will break out soon. When the Republic is dealing with all of these matters, what do you think it values more? Peace, or power?"

Power, of course! Of all the things the Republic asked of its people, it mostly demanded strength! They needed more pilots, more enthusiasm, more loyalty and above all else, more spirit!

In its agonizing journey to become a state, the Bright Republic learned to cast off its naive notions of peace. In times of war, it couldn't afford to see some of their planets acting timidly.

The Greens and the White Doves might rule Cloudy Curtain, but they only get to call the shots as long as they didn't step on the Republic's toes. In times of war, every planet mattered! Who knew if Cloudy Curtain's melancholy could spread one day?

Ves let out a deep breath once he read through the brief proposal. "The Republican Commissioner is always a senior statesman. They're wily old foxes who will instantly see through my intentions. They aren't supposed to favor selfish people."

"If you approach him by yourself, that might be the case." She smirked at him again. "The story is different once the masses are riled up. If the mech fans are starting to make noise, the the ruling coalition will find themselves at the opposite side of both central policy and popular opinion. It'll become obvious that the cowards intend to spend the entire war with their heads buried in the sand."

She certainly painted a very devious scenario. He doubted the Greens and White Doves would take it lying down. They'd certainly counter-attack before it got to that point.

Still, it did not change the basic facts. Once a significant part of the population spoke out, the Republican Commissioner could use that as an excuse to smack the politicians. A public rebuke could easily stop the tax reform bill in its tracks.

"The crucial challenge here lies in provoking the public while tying my company's interests with their own. Both will not come easily." He stated after some thoughts. "I think we'll need some help with this. It's too much to expect you to do this in your spare time. I want you to look for a publicist who can manage relations with the game centers and take care of the publicity campaign."

"I can find plenty of those on campus."

"Make sure they don't have any ties to any of the scum who sit in the Planetary Assembly. I don't want them to realize our intentions before it's too late."

They ended their discussion with a solid course of action. Ves admired Calsie's boldness. Hopefully her devious plan worked. If not, Ves could always investigate the shady farming consortiums.

Chapter 153: Publicist

"When you told me you mastered ninety-nine percent of my design, you weren't lying. You did an adequate job." Ves nodded with satisfaction. "I expect you to focus on the remaining one percent. You've taken the wrong approach at some turns that has led you into a dead end. Even I can't resolve this issue without spending a lot of effort."

A tired looking Carlos pleaded at him. "Can you show me how to fix this first? It's been nagging me for weeks."

With his superior skills, Ves deftly threaded the needle. He emplaced the right components through a fairly congested portion of the half-built silver label mech. Carlos did a decent job with his first real attempt at fabricating the Mark II, but he made a few strange decisions during the assembly process that tightened the noose once he finalized the internals.

"It should pass certification." He judged. He should know, since he supervised the entire session, all seven days of it. "Don't worry about the speed. Perfect your techniques. Any flaws you pass on might prove catastrophic."

At its current scale, the nascent Living Mech Corporation couldn't afford to fail a single product. Not only would a failure throw his balance sheet into disarray, it also affected his reputation. The MTA kept track of every mech

designer's performance. Customers paid a lot of attention to the ratio between failed certifications and total mech sold.

After overseeing the handover of the freshly fabricated mech, he turned back to his own work. The new year prompted him to catch up on his paperwork. The LMC's recent incorporation forced him to expand his administrative scope. He couldn't work in a slapdash manner like he used to. Nowadays, he had to track every material that came in and out of his premises.

Fortunately, a relatively small company like his who employed only a handful of people didn't require much overhead. For now, Ves could take it easy and implement some simple off-the-shelf systems.

He also had to segregate his finances into a number of different accounts. The majority of his money rested in the LMC's balance sheet. Ves wasn't allowed to draw on this massive pile of cash without a justifiable reason.

Not that it mattered, because he only answered to his shareholders. Currently, Ves was his own majority shareholder. After spending a fair amount of money getting the Barracuda to work, he also had to cough up about a million credits to cover his running costs and pay some miscellaneous taxes. The LMC only had about 50 million credits left in savings.

The 250 million credits he received from selling some of his shares technically belonged to him rather than the company. At this stage, the distinction hardly mattered. He was the company, and the company was him. For now, Ves reserved the money for a future license purchase.

"I should hire a clerk." He thought as he installed a commercial tracking program onto his bots. With their new programming, the bots gained the new task of tallying up his inventory. "At least I've already hired a publicist."

Calsie found an interesting student at her university. When Ves first met Gavin Neumann, he thought he met an assertive nerd. Ves had read the senior student's CV and became impressed by his excellent grades and extracurricular activities. Since Ves wanted to find someone flexible, talented and independent, Gavin looked to be an excellent prospect.

He should have been studying at a much more prestigious university, to be honest.

Gavin started his job interview with a very surprising declaration. "I hate mechs."

"Excuse me?"

"I just thought I should let you know. I hate mechs."

"...Okay. Why are you applying to be my publicist if you don't think much of mechs?"

"Would you rather have someone working for you who's slavishly brainwashed into worshipping mechs? Love and obsession often clouds your judgement. I can guarantee you that as long as I'm in charge, I won't be fooled by the hype. As a marketer, it's my job to be the trendsetter, not the follower."

Once Ves understood Gavin's point, he had to admit it made sense. Still, letting someone who hated mechs take charge of his public relations could also backfire on him. Gavin might not fully understand the nuances the in-crowd took for granted. Also, his motivations also drew suspicion. Why work for the LMC if it didn't match his interests?

"That's because your company is at a stage of rapid growth. I've done my research. Despite the incredible risks, there's a lot of money to be made with mechs. I don't care if I have to sell mechs, dung or female sanitary products, as long as it has potential, it's worth my time."

"So basically, you want to work for me because there's lots of promise in my sector. Why not apply for a job at the Raleigh Consortium or something?"

"Pff, where else am I going to work? My talents will be going to waste if I apply for a job at the farming consortiums! Every year, they harvest the exact same crops and sell them to the exact same wholesalers from Bentheim. They're so stodgy and conservative that even a single change of color on their packaging requires an entire conference!"

Tragically, Cloudy Curtain didn't offer much in commerce. Even a high performer like Gavin couldn't compete against graduates from Bentheim and Rittersberg.

Ves eventually decided to hire Gavin. The assertive student might lack experience, but he had an abundance of enthusiasm. Gavin looked forward to be an integral part of the LMC's rise.

A mere week after he went to work, Gavin proved his worth by successfully getting the gaming centers to adopt the Young Blood as a promotional mech. The usage rate of his training mech had skyrocketed. Once Gavin and Calsie finished designing a publicity campaign, Ves looked forward to twisting public opinion against his political opponents.

"That will take some time, however." He sighed and looked back to the half-assembled Dortmund. When Ves hadn't been supervising Carlos, he had already started to reconstruct the frame of the massive industrial printer.

Ves made decent progress in the early stages of his reconstruction project. The blueprint and the repair manual he obtained from the Clifford Society proved its utility by allowing him to assemble the salvaged and reprinted components in the correct order.

Even if he didn't grasp each component's purpose, the printer should work as long as he handled them appropriately.

In fact, he assembled the printer a lot faster than he originally thought. Despite its immense size, the Dortmund's complexity lay mostly in its irreplaceable components. Starting from an inventory of salvaged parts allowed Ves to skip the most difficult phase and put together the Dortmund with relative ease.

Another week went by as Ves immersed himself with the reconstruction. It started to look more and more like one of those shiny new machines he saw back when he went on a school trip to a major mech manufacturer.

The good times ended when Ves hit a snag at ninety-eight percent completion. Most of its advanced components had already taken their places, but if Ves didn't do something about its processors, the massive block of machinery might as well be scrap.

This last stumbling block constantly gnawed at him like a bone stuck in his throat. The questionable legality of the project prevented him from contacting support.

He tried asking Dietrich to find a hacker on the black market, but Ves only received a couple of dubious offers so far. The main problem with trying to do business with shady hackers was that he couldn't trust them. What if they slipped in some backdoors on the sly?

"Even the System is of little help."

Learning to hack to the point of being able to tamper the processors required too many skills. Ves couldn't afford to divert his precious DP into exploring a side path. As for the Store, it sold all kinds of utilities, but Ves couldn't operate them without the required proficiency. As for the processors themselves, the System disdained selling such materials.

"I guess the only way to resolve this is through the Clifford Society."

Transactions between Society members had to adhere to the organization's rules. If everyone constantly scammed each other, its marketplace could never grow to so big.

Besides hiring a trustworthy hacker, Ves also wanted to purchase several essential machinery to upgrade his workshop to a fully functional operation.

"I guess I'll have to take a trip after all."

It might take one or two weeks until the shipyard back in Bentheim repaired his corvette. Marcella also expected it to take some time assembling a crew for the luxurious ship. She still had to do her job after all, so she left the grunt work to her assistants. Nevertheless, Ves appreciated her aid.

This meant that before he went on his way to earn merits, he had enough time to design a virtual mech. Ves wanted to stock up on DP and enhance his ability to survive another fight. While these missions aren't supposed to put a mech designer into the frontlines, they often entailed many unforeseen risks.

After coming back from his ordeal in Bentheim, Ves reflected on the best way to keep him alive. He realized that enhancing his stealth might be the most practical way to go. He could leave the fighting to others.

He left the giant workshop floor and the incomplete Dortmund and reached a spare workplace that his cousins turned into an improvised gym. Ves splurged on a couple of simulator pods along with some advanced workout equipment in order to pay them back and to alleviate their boredom.

Right now, Melkor and Raella engaged in some sparring. Their athletic physiques glistened with sweat as they jabbed and kicked at each other while appearing to dance. Ves didn't pretend to understand their moves, though he noted that Raella's momentary bursts of power unsettled Melkor.

After their session wound down, they left the improvised sparring ring and replenished their fluids.

"How are you two settling in?"

"It's kind of boring here." Raella remarked. "There's nothing to do around here. The people here are hicks and I don't have my friends to keep me company."

Melkor shook his head and tutted at his niece. "An assignment is not the time to have fun. We're on the clock now so you better keep sharp."

"That's all fine and dandy but how long do we have to wait until we can flex our mechs?"

Their mechs currently rested in a pair of containers in his workshop's backyard. Raella piloted a light skirmisher while Melkor brought a medium laser rifleman with him. Together, they made for a rounded pair.

Unfortunately, Ves had to leave a mech behind if he went on a trip. His corvette only fit one unpacked mech.

"I should be getting a permit back this week, but I've come to talk about something else. What do you think about taking another trip?"

Ves briefly explained the possibility to accompany him on an expedition. Raella jumped on the opportunity.

"Take me, take me! I'm so bored right now I could die! I can't even relax outside due to all of the weird clouds."

A stoic like Melkor didn't mind holding the fort. With his rifleman mech standing guard, Ves didn't have to worry about the safety of his very valuable workshop.

With all of his current matters taken care of, Ves could finally devote some time on coming up with a new design. He wanted to replicate the commercial success of his Young Blood, though this time he had to do it without borrowing the momentum of his public debut.

"I should also design something that will compliment my current strategy. Only older teenagers are able to pilot a 3-star mech like the Young Blood."

While Ves had also designed a couple of 2-star mechs like the Mist Prowler and the Speed Demon, they lacked the refinement of his later works. Their specifications couldn't match the dominant models.

Even if Ves had to regress back to the 2-star tier, he still wished to round out his catalog of virtual mechs. He started to think what kind of training mech might sell well among the younger teens who usually piloted these mechs.

Since he already designed a knight, he should begin to design a ranged mech instead. Besides a rifleman, Ves could hardly think of a better choice.

Best of all, Ves also had immediate access to an expert. "I need your help Melkor."

"What's up, Ves?"

"I'm planning to design a rifleman mech. Please tell me your thoughts on this archetype. What do you see in this kind of mech and what made you decide to pilot one?"

Chapter 154 Holy Grail

The security guard yawned as he closed the hefty coffer. Its antrigrav modules sprung back to life and took up position behind its sharp-faced owner.

"Everything checks out. It's a false alarm." The guard declared and waved the new arrival away. "Off you go. Enjoy your stay at Cloudy Curtain."

The middle-aged man nodded and sauntered to the exit. Bypassing the security of this dreary spaceport had taken a lot more effort than he thought. For some reason, the spaceport recently received a massive upgrade in its security suite. It took some quick thinking for the man to respond to the alarms.

As he walked outside the building, he looked up at the dreary clouds that constantly shrouded this planets. The few sheens of color, akin to flattened rainbows, hardly cheered up his day. He hailed an aircar and set his destination to the opposite side of the planet.

After several hours of flight, the man departed from the aircar and looked at the quiet neighborhood he'd be living in for the time being. He glanced at the sturdy walls of the guarded compound a few blocks away and whistled appreciatively.

"This is going to require a lot of patience."

His client had already prepared a house for him. Outwardly, it looked identical to the many other homesteads on the street. In fact, the house incorporated many dampening materials that suppressed signals and blocked unwanted spying.

After entering the home, the man ignored the furnished house and the closet full of clothes. He directly climbed to the attic at the top and approached a camouflaged window that could not be spotted outside.

The coffer dropped to the spotless floor and opened by itself. Instead of the mundane clothes the man showed to the spaceport's security guard, the coffer held a dizzying array of alloy components.

The man took each of the components and methodically assembled them until the entire construction resembled a metal tree sitting on its sides. Its intimidating size and shape resembled a railgun, only scaled up to the point it could threaten mechs.

The man laid down behind the complicated weapon and swept over its systems. The railgun's muzzle aimed straight at the entrance of the guarded compound that could barely be seen through the attic's window.

"You got away once, but I've seen your tricks now." The man whispered as recalled his previous failure. He never expected to come up short due the presence of a mythical miniaturized shield generator.

He made some adjustments this time. As long as his target left the compound, his railgun would never miss.

He simply had to be patient.

Back at the workshop, Melkor expressed his views on rifleman mechs with a very simple premise. "Why do mechs wield rifles? Why don't all of them come in the style of frontline mechs?"

For humanoid mechs, the main difference between a standard mech and a frontline mech had to do with their arms. A frontline mech replaced its arms with gun barrels, while a standard mech retained its human-like arms capable of manipulating external gear like mech-sized rifles.

"A skilled pilot can manipulate the limbs of their mechs with great precision." Ves repeated the standard answer found in textbooks. "A frontline mech is largely reliant on its hardware and software to aim, which can shore up the aim of an average mech pilot. A standard mech on the other hand combines the use of its systems along with its pilot's intuition to deliver better results."

A lot of mech designers thought that adding arms and a rifle to a mech wasted a lot of resources. Yet on an actual battlefield, a standard mech often

outperformed its frontline mech counterpart. Many factors played a role, from the increased range of motion afforded by its arms, to the ability to make better use of a pilot's real life marksmanship.

"You mentioned plenty of reasons, but you forgot the most fundamental one. We simply like the feel of a gun in our hands." Melkor tapped the side of his head. "You're not a potentate, so you don't know the feeling of piloting a frontline mech. The first time I immersed myself into such a model, I felt as if someone amputated my arms and crudely welded a pair of gun barrels in their place. No matter what, I never regarded them as my own limbs."

No one liked to pilot an amputated mech! Those who piloted frontline mechs often fell behind in skill, work ethic and genetic aptitude. More than half of the mech pilots of the Bright Republic fell under this category.

"What makes piloting riflemen so special then?"

"It's the most basic archetype besides knights. A mech pilot who masters the rifleman can pilot every ranged mech. Skill matters the most. A great pilot can easily ruin a rifleman while a great pilot can mow down an entire squad before he succumbs."

Ves started to understand Melkor's perspective. "In short, it comes down to skill. How do you describe your learning experience when you were in your early teens?"

"Everyone started polishing their marksmanship with their own bodies. A Larkinson like me enjoyed a great amount of tutoring, so I easily passed the early courses. I jumped straight into mech marksmanship and adjusted my habits to fit the mech scale. It was kind of boring, but necessary to go through this process. Not everyone succeeded in time to take the follow up classes. These guys always end up piloting the frontline mechs."

"If unlearning the habits learned through shooting a gun in your own hands is so difficult, why not jump to practicing mech marksmanship directly?"

"It has to do with foundation. Anyone who tries to learn a fundamental skill with mechs will only ever master the process with that model alone. Once the mech pilot switches to another model, he'll find out his marksmanship has to be broken down entirely before it can accomodate the new mech. Remember that humanoid mechs are meant to reflect the human form."

"I see. If you master the skill with your own body, you will always be able to adjust your marksmanship with every mech you come across."

Melkor smiled at Ves. "That's right. The skill transference always works best if your mind and body has already been imprinted with the habits that work best for you. The real challenge a young mech cadet faces is to transfer his physical marksmanship to mech marksmanship. The first time is always the hardest, but once someone is capable of doing it once, it takes a lot less time to do it again with another model."

Mech academies measured how much time it took for each mech pilot to transfer his shooting proficiency. They kept scores separately for both laser and ballistic weaponry, as both types had their own nuances.

"Since your very first breakthrough matters a lot, I can imagine the academies pays a lot of attention to its training mechs. What kind of models have you worked with?"

His cousin chuckled. "My experiences aren't typical. My aptitude is quite high and my talent in marksmanship is pretty impressive. Furthermore, the family offered a lot of after-school training so I gained my proficiencies five years ahead of everyone else. You should ask Raella what she thinks about those mechs."

"Pff." The woman blew as she finished her drink nearby. "Don't get me started on those machines. All of the models boast that they're easier to breakthrough than others. You can pick between light mechs, medium mechs, fast mechs, slow mechs, tall mechs, short mechs, whatever you want! Most people pick the models that closely resemble their own bodies, but I don't think it matters really."

Raella's opinion echoed the studies conducted by academics. Not a single consistent factor had been detected that could increase the odds of breakthroughs. It appeared to everyone that rather than mechs, the key point of focus should be the mech cadet in question.

"Rather than try anything fancy with the training mechs, the academies just offer us the least complicated mechs. There are many things a cadet has to take into account when piloting a multiton machine that could easily crush a house. Too many distractions can hinder the learning experience."

This was also why mech cadets started their training with older, outdated mechs. Modern designs incorporated many features that could easily overwhelm a young and immature mind. A good training mech focused on simplicity first and performance next.

Ves had already done the same with the Young Blood, but the stakes were higher this time. Proficiency in melee combat always transferred easier than proficiency in ranged combat. No holy grail existed that could shrink this disparity, and Ves didn't delude himself into thinking he could accomplish what millions of mech designers failed to achieve.

As Ves kept asking for stories, he caught an important difference between Raella and Melkor. His niece never enjoyed the training. She only grudgingly kept up with her academy's demanding curriculum, but spent most of her spare time mastering knife fighting.

This gave Ves an opening if he employed his unique insights into the X-Factor. He might not be able to stumble upon the holy grail, but perhaps he could make do with fruit juice. Compared to the bland water that no one really liked, perhaps he could entice the kids to drink a little more.

All in all, his talk with Melkor proved useful in shaping the concept of his next design. In his opinion, the way forward did not rest on coddling the kids.

"Simple mechs don't make very fun mechs."

A lot of training mechs went overboard in terms of simplicity. One of the reasons why his Young Blood drew so many teenagers was because it featured a couple of interesting gimmicks. It spiced up the boring knight concept and made it a lot more interesting without demanding an excessive amount of skill.

Those who ascended from piloting 1-star mechs sought to pilot more powerful mechs. They've already achieved the minimum amount of proficiency in marksmanship. In his mind, a training mech should have a soul.

When Ves left the gym and reached his terminal, he browsed the galactic net to see some examples of rifleman mech meant for training. As expected, most tended to be built for simplicity and ease of use. Other designs chose the other extreme and spiced up the design in order to generate more interest.

"They're too much like toys." Ves shook his head. He didn't agree with the notion of treating the mech cadets like kids suffering from a short attention span. "

Now that he established a direction, Ves considered what kind of rifleman mech he should design. He chose to go for a medium weight class due to the additional power and capacity it afforded over training mechs designed to be as cheap as possible. In any case, Ves didn't need to consider the costs when designing a virtual mech.

"Properly speaking, a rifleman mech is all about its rifle. I should begin with the weapon."

He recently acquired the Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II sub-skill, so he knew a thing or two about laser rifles. He chose to go for laser rifles which many mech pilots mastered first. Energy weapons demanded a little less consideration compared to ballistic weapons, though those who mastered the latter first all turned out to be prodigies.

Still, even with the optimization skill, Ves did not fully understand the full nuances of laser weapons. When he thought about his inadequacies, he suddenly reminded himself that he once made off with research notes on a certain kind of laser.

Ves looked around and saw that no one was present. His cousins likely entered the simulator pods while Carlos already worked on their company's next order.

He turned on his comm and turned on his Privacy Shield. Now, even the security cameras and other sensors wouldn't be able to spy on him. He navigated to his files and after inputting a couple of passwords, he reached the folder labeled 'Gamma Laser Rifle Research and Development'.

If anyone from the MTA could see him now, they'd shoot him on sight. Ves knew he had a poisoned chalice in his hands, yet he couldn't bear to delete the files. Radioactive or not, gamma lasers worked on much of the same principles as regular laser rifles.

He stood to gain a lot of understanding in the workings of a laser rifle if he gleaned some insights from the research notes. While Ves didn't have enough time to decipher the complete collection, he only needed a few pointers to elevate his next design.

"It might not be a holy grail, but a poisoned chalice shouldn't bring any harm as long as I don't take a sip."

Whether he'd be able to resist the temptation, no one knew.

Chapter 155 Darkness in Mans Hear

Joshua followed his friends to the game center today. While he didn't need to rent a simulator pod since he owned one himself, he still preferred to play with others. They entered one of the closest game center to their school and greeted a few other classmates as they waited in line. After paying for the entire afternoon, they entered the common room.

Large groups of teenagers lingered in the lounge. Some of them discussed their strategies, while others talked about the news. Several projections of matches gave them something else to talk about. Several ads aired in between each match.

"Introducing the Young Blood, Cloudy Curtain's pride! Pilot our homegrown mech designer's training mech for free!"

When one of them showcased the game center's promotional mechs, Joshua squeezed his fists. As a fairly newly ascended player in the Silver League, Joshua still lacked the qualifications to pilot a 3-star mech. An average player had to spend at least a year to meet the requirements to unlock this tier.

Short ads like these became a conversation starter since they first aired in a couple of game centers. Most of the teenagers gained a new appreciation for knights once they gave the model a try. It left younger potentates like Joshua green with envy.

He had been one of Chasing Clouds' earliest fans! Why did Cloudy Curtain's homegrown mech designer suddenly move to 3-star mechs? It left most of his starting fanbase in the dust!

Joshua hadn't given up. He took on his training with renewed passion, working harder than practically every other classmate in his mech classes in order to climb up in the Silver League. He made some gradual progress, but at his current rate, he might as well be a snail.

"Hey, speaking about the Young Blood, have you heard the latest news?"

"What's up? Did our hometown mech designer finally develop a new design?"

"Pff, nah. That lazy bum is probably lying dormant again. I heard some of my mates that he might be moving away from Cloudy Curtain?"

"No way! He's ours! I'll beat him up if he's defecting to Bentheim!"

"Nah, it's not like that. Mr. Larkinson wants to stay, but some corrupt politicians are trying to chase him away. They're cooking up a new law that will hike up his taxes to ninety percent or something."

"What?! Even I would take a hike with those rates. They can't do that! Ever since Mr. Larkinson has made a splash, our mech scene is actually showing signs of life. It'll die if he's gone!"

Joshua frowned to the side. He approached his older seniors. "Is what you're saying true? Is the Planetary Assembly really trying to chase our only mech designer from our home planet?"

"Sure as hell. Just talk to the folks around here, half of us have already heard about it. My older brother who's studying finance says you can even look up the dirty details on the galactic net. Those dirtbag politicians aren't even hiding their crimes!"

The news truly alarmed Joshua. Like many locals, he was proud of his heritage and his birth planet. Cloudy Curtain might not be the most developed planet in the Republic, but they stubbornly stuck to their own.

While his well-off family insured he'd have the pick of academies once he graduated from his local school, he didn't wish to let go of his roots. Joshua intended to go back to his parents and give them a piece of his mind once he returned home. They'd better not be complicit in this rotten conspiracy.

As for the mech designer in question, Ves had taken an entire day to skim the forbidden research notes.

The bloodstained documents fascinated him in a horrifying way.

It started off rather clinical and dry. The lead scientist, Dr. Samuel Kawasaki, likely copied over a bunch of important documents whenever his team made a breakthrough.

Much of the content consisted of extremely dense reports filled with incomprehensible jargon or massive tables of measurements. It might take many weeks for Ves to puzzle out the meaning of these documents. Luckily, Dr. Kawasaki included a handful of progress reports that had obviously been written for his superiors.

The senior researcher had been a little more legible in this case, though Ves could sense the contempt dripping through the words. Kawasaki must not have enjoyed dumbing down his words.

The opening statement of Kawasaki's very first progress report caught his eye.

"The purpose of weapons is to kill. Why do we have to shackle them with artificial limits? We live. We eat. We die. We are but animals uplifted into space. Let us reacquaint ourselves with the long-forgotten art of butchery that our race excels in."

Despite his eccentricities, Kawasaki led his team of researchers into what they thought of as reinventing the wheel. While they were aware of the basic

principles of a gamma laser, they possessed no real experience in developing an actual rifle around a graser.

Much of the researchers in Kawasaki's team had previously worked on regular laser rifles, so they competently listed the problems they had to solve. The researchers faced two major problems.

First, the graser rifle had to endure extreme conditions. It sucked up a lot more power each time the rifle emitted a beam. The team had to go back to the drawing board and develop an extremely robust design that could efficiently transfer large amounts of power at once. It also had to divert much of the heat in order to prevent the weapon from melting up.

This design problem went in hand with choosing the right materials. Regular alloys and cheap exotics couldn't handle the stress. In order to be effective on the ground and in space, the weapon also had to be paired with incredibly advanced energy cells.

The problems might seem unsurmountable, but Kawasaki and his people took a shortcut. Without any sense of shame, they pirated existing licences and otherwise procured restricted blueprints from the black market. They borrowed from the best practices of renowned senior mech designers in order to address every issue.

Ves had to admit the researchers picked well. The first prototypes performed badly, but after many intensive tests, they slimmed down the design and cut back on its cost. While it still cost abundantly more than a regular laser rifle, the latest iterations of the forbidden weapon finally worked well enough to be produced en masse.

"If these figures are correct, the hidden base had already sold more than a thousand graser rifles."

The thought of swarms of pirate mechs armed with graser rifles chilled him to the bones. Such a terrible force could paralyze the shipping lanes of half the Republic.

If that hadn't been enough, Dr. Kawasaki requested live testing. He hadn't been content with using cloned human tissue like any other conventional research outfit. His successes swelled his clout, and once he demanded his weapons to be tested on living humans, his masters were eager to comply.

The data gathered from these sadistic tests laid out Kawasaki's cruel imagination. Somehow, his masters had no trouble procuring an abundant amount of captives. They'd been subjected to an endless series of cruel experiments, from irradiating them directly, to studying the long-term exposure of intermittent radiation behind a thick alloy wall.

No matter the specific experiment, any captives subjected to a graser eventually died in gruesome manners. Their cells degenerated due to the damage the gamma rays inflicted onto their DNA.

"There's no point to human testing."

Modern science already established the effects of radiation damage. Kawasaki didn't have to confirm these well-established facts by himself. Ves realized that the doctor simply commissioned the lurid tests because he could. The rest of the research team went about it with as much enthusiasm as a group of kids at a zoo.

Perhaps these researchers merely expressed their human nature. They wanted to see the results of their work in the most direct and visceral fashion. The static experiments they performed on sterile pieces of cloned flesh simply couldn't beat the desperate screams of a man slowly melting from inside.

Ves had no idea something like this had been going on. It explained some of the weird spaces on the bottom floor of the abandoned base. They'd been prisons.

As his comm started to fizzle out due to the excessive power draw of the Privacy Shield, Ves closed the final page and turned everything off. He leaned back on his chair and sighed.

"Even a scientist can fall to such a depth."

The dreary research notes had given Ves a sobering wake up call. The darkness that hid inside each person's hearts had never been eradicated. Even as humanity conquered half of the galaxy, the darkness continued to proliferate.

Ves momentarily felt unsafe. Despite his cozy security arrangement, he felt awfully exposed. The base might be destroyed, but the design was already out there. The pirates already owned several thousand graser rifles, and more might still be on their way once the shadowy corporation who funded the research resumed their production elsewhere.

The Komodo Star Sector might face a reckoning one day.

"It's not like I can do anything about it. I don't even dare to inform the MTA."

No matter how many precautions he took, he didn't underestimate the pan-galactic organization. They're one of the very few organizations in the galaxy that could match the Mech Designer System's capabilities. Even their branches out in the rim posed a significant threat.

Reading Kawasaki's words caused Ves to fall into a melancholic mood. The knowledge that so many people died to satisfy a researcher's whim made him reconsider what he should do.

Though Ves had no use of the results that arose from unethical experiments, he nonetheless gained quite a bit of very practical knowledge.

He learned what kind of designs worked best with energetic lasers. He got to know many unique design quirks that could massively improve the performance of any directed energy weapon, though Ves had to watch out for licenced designs.

He also learned what kind of materials fared best in a compact rifle design. Some of the conventional alloys that normal rifles used tended to perform catastrophically once a threshold had been reached. Knowing what materials he should watch out for was already a massive gain to Ves.

Eventually, he came to a decision. "What's done is done. I'm not responsible for these atrocities. All that matters is that I'm currently holding a copy. Since it's already in my hands, I might as well make use of them. Perhaps I can redeem the lives that died unjustly."

His somewhat noble aspirations lifted his spirits and pushed him along a strange state of mind. Ves threw away his considerations and started to compose the myth he'd use for his rifleman design.

"It must have a heart."

Dr. Kawasaki and his ilk had behaved in a cruel and heartless fashion. Ves wanted his laser rifleman to be a design that invoked justice and compassion.

"A bounty hunter. A hunter of criminals."

Such a profession brought death to those who sinned. They might not enjoy the most stellar reputation, but they at least contributed to society by removing the filth that stained it. Ves came up with the concept of a compassionate bounty hunter.

He already started to fill out the bounty hunter's imaginary biography.

Ves named him the Dogged One, for his harsh youth as a fugitive and later for his relentless pursuit of his prey.

He lived in the same medieval fantasy world of the Instructor. Whereas the latter lived among the righteous and powerful, the Dogged One eked out a sparse existence where he donated most of his money to support the families of his target's victims.

A survivor of a gruesome incident himself, the Dogged One made it his life's mission to see every murderer brought to justice. His favorite means of punishment entailed the use of his enchanted crossbow. He nailed down his targets with unerring accuracy. No matter how many bolts his weapon fired, they all hit their mark.

He initially hadn't been very good with his weapon. It took lots of persistent practice in order to get to this point. Ves wanted to use this backstory to shape his X-Factor into a dogged persistence for improvement.

"It's not about fun anymore. It's about redeeming yourself by delivering justice."

Chapter 156 Tryops

The Dogged One was no saint. He pursued the scum of the world for selfish reasons instead of contributing to society. He wanted revenge, plain and simple. Exacting justice was only a side effect of his endless pursuit to kill every murderer.

Ves put it this way. "Even victims are marked by the darkness in their hearts. Some find a healthy means of coping with their trauma. The Dogged One can only sate his thirst by inflicting the same torment to those who resembled his tormentors."

In a dog-eat-dog world, refined notions of justice had no place.

In fact, Ves mirrored the Dogged One's tendency to seek revenge to Dr. Kawasaki's urge to see others suffer from his inventions.

Such was human nature, no matter much others liked to argue otherwise. In fact, many aliens exhibited the same tendency, but that was another story.

"Am I going astray?"

He originally planned to design a training mech. Coloring his design with an intensive myth like the Dogged One might be counterproductive.

"It's a strong image, for good or ill." Under the influence of a special mood, Ves came up with it spontaneously. It carried an authentic spark of life, unlike many of his other figments of imagination. Ves was loathe to abandon such a valuable gem.

He still feared the consequences of employing the image. Will he be twisting their morals and worldview? "There's a limit to the X-Factor in virtual mechs. I doubt much will bleed over if it's possible in the first place."

To be honest, Ves had no proof either way. He never tested most of his assumptions involving the X-Factor. Perhaps the lack of formal study prevented the System from granting him the appropriate skills and sub-skills regarding this nebulous field.

"What may come will come." Ves decided. "It's not entirely bad if students gain some perspective in their lives. With the onset of war, there's a chance they'll be fighting in the frontlines."

The Bright-Vesia Wars generally lasted around five to seven years. Historically, there had been cases where certain groundside conflicts grew to such an extent that the defenders conscripted barely trained teenagers to fill up their spare mechs.

Such an act of borrowing from the future to quench a crisis in the present never really worked out for the planet in question. Veteran mech pilots often tore them apart.

After the war had ended, the entire planet suffered the consequences. Every planet and star system had to contribute to the defense of the Bright Republic. A generational gap of qualified mech pilots reduced their clout and gave them less of a voice in matters of policy and national security.

The future of the Bright Republic lay in its youth!

For a moment, Ves imagined what it would be like to influence Cloudy Curtain's young potentates. Anyone from the age of ten to eighteen had to learn how to operate mechs. Even those who never wished to set their foot on the battlefield learned how to kill.

What was it like to possess the power to influence these impressionable youths? Ves could potentially make them smarter, bolder and more confident by incorporating these virtues in his work.

Ves shook his head. "It doesn't feel right to start over with a different inspiration."

Despite its problematic elements, Ves continued to flesh out the Dogged One's backstory. He carefully envisioned his troubled youth as a persecuted thief and slave, his growth period as a crossbowman in a conscripted army, to his eventual desertion from a military disaster.

Throughout all of these events, the Dogged One's capacity for stubborn survival allowed him to pick up the skills that set him on the path of a bounty hunter and executioner.

The details of the story mattered a lot, as Ves wanted his design to emphasize the conscious layer over the primal layer of the X-Factor.

Great instincts helped experienced pilots more than trainees due to their ability to respond to a crisis faster.

On the other hand, the low-level battles the trainees often engaged in were less intensive. Sound judgement and measured decision making mattered more. If the pilots of a mech influenced by the myth of the Dogged One adopted some of his habits, that might not be an entirely bad thing.

Ves deliberately chose to make the Dogged One a specialist in the crossbow. A mundane non-repeating crossbow could only fire one bolt at a time. It took a lot of time to pull back the string in order to arm another bolt.

The Dogged One couldn't afford to miss. His sword-fighting skills paled in comparison to his marksmanship, so any enemy that came close could easily butcher him. Thus, the Dogged One unceasingly practiced with his crossbows until his marksmanship became unparalleled.

"Now that I have this image, should I add another?"

This led to the larger question whether every design benefited from multiple images. His Marc Antony Mark II used three images at once, and it hadn't suffered for it. Yet Ves instinctively rejected the notion for several reasons.

First, maintaining too many images strained his concentration. Second, his Young Blood design performed well enough without a multifaceted construction. Certainly, it rated a little lower in terms of X-Factor, but did it make any difference?

Finally, Ves also had to take his own circumstances in mind. He only reserved three weeks at most to design his training mech. If he tried to maintain multiple images at once, he'd be taking frequent breaks. If he only focused on a single intent, then he'd easily be able to accomplish a lot of work in a single stretch.

He decided to keep it simple. "Let's move on and select a base model."

With an appropriate image in mind, he headed to his terminal and visited Iron Spirit's market section. After opening the catalog, he turned to the list of 2-star medium rifleman mechs and leisurely browsed the list.

Rifleman mechs came in many different shapes and sizes even in the mediumweight classification.

Generally, they could be classified as all-rounders or specialists. The former featured stronger artificial musculature in order to leverage more strength when wielding melee weapons. The latter gave up on melee combat and optimized their designs for precision and coordination.

Since Ves aimed for a training mech, he did not have to consider any alternatives and chose to go for specialist designs. He quickly found out that these rifleman mechs could be further divided into mobile and precision mechs.

Mobile riflemen mechs basically functioned like skirmishers. They optimized their legs for speed and mobility. They're designed to battle in complex conditions where battle lines may be fluid. They specialized in taking down fast-moving targets such as light mechs and their targeting systems reflected this role.

Precision mechs focused on medium to long-ranged fire from a static position. People often considered these rifleman as snipers, though the moniker did not apply to every mech of this type.

They differed from mobile rifleman mechs in several ways. Their arms were smaller and more fragile, but gained the ability to wield a rifle with extreme precision if the pilot possessed the skill. Their targeting systems might have problems tracking fast-moving targets, but they aided considerably in increasing the odds of a hit at longer ranges.

Ves narrowed his choice to this sub-type of mechs. The Dogged One pursued the path of delivering death with a single shot. A commando-like run-and-gun battle did not suit the image.

He let his mind sway a bit when he scrolled over the designs. He suddenly stopped when he faintly imagined a resonance between the Dogged One and the projected design.

[Rickshaft Conglomerate TOC-1 Tryops]: 500,000 bright credits

He never heard of the Rickshaft Conglomerate. Ves quickly browsed the galactic net and it turned out the company used to be a fairly big deal in several non-mech related industries such as real estate and fuel refining.

One day, the company decided to jump in on then-developing mech craze and released the TOC-1 Tryops.

The concept of the mech sounded simple. The Tryops drew its name for its unique but glitchy main optical sensors. Basically, it had three eyes, and every eye saw the world in a different way. Specialized processors took in the sensory data and fed an enhanced image to the mech pilot.

Though it sounded daunting, the designers employed by the Rickshaft Conglomerate made sure to simplify the composite footage. The few mech pilots who experienced the Tryops in person praised its highly developed sensory feed, which was very advanced for its time.

The rest of the mech performed fairly poorly. Besides the sensors, the Tryops played it fairly extreme. The designers envisioned their product to be employed as base defenders. They increased the Tryops accuracy at the cost of armor, mobility and endurance.

The only other redeeming feature of the design was that it came with a pretty good laser rifle. The Rickshaft Conglomerate obviously splurged quite a bit of

money to license a premium model from a specialist designer or manufacturer.

Fortunately for Ves, the rifle suited his purposes. Its default settings caused the weapon to fire a powerful sustained beam capable of melting through thin layers of armor in a single shot. Afterwards, the rifle required a fairly long cycle time in order to vent its immense heat.

Overall, the entire Tryops design presented an extreme in mech design that later proved to be a waste of money. While the concept of the design had some good points, the market decided otherwise.

In the chaotic advent of the Age of Mechs, conventional doctrines weren't fully established. Few mech pilots appreciated piloting what was essentially a sitting duck. The whole concept of mechs at the time focused on its superior mobility in any kind of terrain over other alternatives such as tanks.

"If a mech can't move fast enough, it should at least be able to take some hits. If a mech can't even do that, who would want to pilot it in the first place?"

The war mongers at the time expected every mech to come under fire. The Tryops performed admirably in its offensive aspects but came up short when considering its paper-thin defenses.

Might as well install a cheap turret!

The entire Rickshaft Conglomerate ultimately went bankrupt.

Despite its checkered history, Ves did not turn away from the Tryops. Its strengths and weaknesses already meshed fairly well with the Dogged One. He could save quite a bit of time if he didn't need to redesign too much.

Ves also looked forward to the challenge of coming up with a successful variant of this failed design. Its first incarnation failed miserably, and that affected its current embodiment in Iron Spirit.

Hardly anyone bought the virtual mech. Many mech designers also eschewed the unpopular design. Few of them dared to gamble with half a million credits. This suited Ves fine as he wouldn't be dealing with excessive competition.

By now, Ves built up a fairly strong brand in Cloudy Curtain. Even if he wasn't a big deal in the rest of the Republic, he could still rely on his nucleus of loyal fans to try out his virtual mechs no matter the quality.

He bought the virtual license and imported its design into the System. Using the System's own Designer module, Ves started to envision his variant.

Besides updating its outdated methods and implementation, Ves wanted to make the model viable in a wider variety of terrain. When he thought of the Dogged One, he envisioned a patient hunter who ambushed his targets from the bushes.

"I should focus on stealth and firepower."

The Tryops variant should never be the vanguard. Like the Dogged One, his design should choose a good position beforehand and wait for its prey to come into view. Once its target was in its crosshairs, he should be able to deliver crippling damage in a single strike.

"I'll also have to beef up the laser rifle."

His recent foray into gamma lasers taught Ves a lot of tricks on how to handle high-powered lasers.

Chapter 157 Stealth Armor

Ves began to design his variant in earnest. First, he began with his usual ritual of focusing a desired image into an intent. He only had the Dogged One in mind, so his practiced mind easily slipped into his desired state.

As a habit, Ves started with the weapon first. The Tryops came with a fairly excellent laser rifle that had already been integrated in the base model's

targeting systems. It came with two default modes, one meant for power and precision and another one for close-to-medium range strafing.

While the laser rifle adequately fulfilled both roles, the mech itself fared poorly on the latter front. Ves had to consider whether he wanted to keep this shooting mode. Just because the mech fared poorly at closer ranges didn't mean that the rapid-fire mode had no use.

Yet when he envisioned the Dogged One, he imagined a complete dedication to the crossbow. Even if the weapon only excelled in one single aspect, the Dogged One always made it work by choosing the right battles.

"Limitations shapes behavior. Rifleman mechs always let the enemy come to them. They can choose to engage or retreat at will."

Ves kept his goal of designing a training mech in mind when he chose to remove the rapid-fire mode. While its absence might not make his model very popular, it nevertheless enhanced its focus. Mech pilots promoted their mastery faster if they dedicated their training to a single aspect rather than flitting around between different styles.

He proceeded to extensively overhaul the laser rifle. He wanted to turn it into a compact laser cannon in a way. The weapon should be extremely precise at medium-to-long ranges and its laser beam should cripple any mech when it struck a weak point.

He tore out many redundant and outdated components. In their place, he quickly designed a couple of revised components made of different alloys that improved the rifle's maximum power and heat emission. Ves had to make sure the weapon wouldn't melt when it fired a couple of shots, though he estimated the weapon could only handle five shots at a time before it required an extensive cooldown.

"Five shots isn't much for a normal rifle." He thought. If anyone else heard that Ves wanted to redesign a rifle that could only shoot this much in a single encounter, they'd call him crazy. "Once they see it in action, they'll see why it doesn't matter."

By converting the rifle into a high-powered compact laser cannon, Ves completely transcended the 2-star domain. He borrowed heavily from the insights gleaned from Dr. Kawasaki's research notes. Studying the forbidden material had taught him much on how to make gamma lasers workable, though he lacked the foundation to design a graser rifle from scratch.

Furthermore, he also borrowed some design elements from the Caesar Augustus' wrist laser cannons. The weapon system employed an extremely compact arrangement that allowed the hybrid knight to fire off a substantial amount of firepower, though its accuracy left much to be desired. The practical example allowed Ves to slim down his rifle design to a reasonable size.

Compared to the jumbo-sized laser cannons, his own version still looked like a regular rifle. It only massed a little bit more than the base model. By sacrificing the rapid-fire mode, Ves freed up sufficient space to soup up its precision mode to a ludicrous level.

It only took one-and-a-half days to complete the redesign, but Ves wasn't done. He spent four more days subjecting the weapon to a large variety of tests.

He uncovered a large amount of flaws. His implementation of borrowed knowledge had been awfully rough, which indicated that he hadn't fully mastered the theories behind these elements.

Ves expected something like this to happen, so he simply shrugged and plugged the holes whenever he encountered them. Through this constant

iterative process of testing and fixing, the rifle gained a more refined appearance, though it also boasted significantly more mass.

He had no other choice. He underestimated the amount of buffers a high-powered laser rifle demanded. Many simulations frequently ended badly due to minute unintentional heat dispersion. Some of the rifle's more sensitive components had a tendency to melt into a puddle if that happened.

The materials he had to work with limited his options. While Dr. Kawasaki had the luxury of working with modern materials, Ves could only choose from a small selection of exotics. What he couldn't accomplish with quality, he had to substitute it with quantity. Hence the added bulk.

The only good thing that came out of it was that the rifle could now handle six shots at a time.

"Now that I'm done with the weapon, let's move on to the mech."

He already completed one major modification. The next phase entailed modifying the frame to compliment its intended fighting style. In order to be an effective mech right out of the gate, it had to avoid enemy detection and pursuit.

"Didn't I already own a license for a particle generator?"

His Mist Prowler threw up a cloud of vapor and particles in order to obscure his surroundings. While the Mist Prowler used the cloud offensively, it could also be used as a tool for escape.

He browsed his existing licenses and saw that he owned the virtual license of the Relix Systems Valhalla Particle Ejection Module 1st Edition.

"It'll do."

Before he integrated the particle generator into his design, he first had to revamp the entire frame. He did his usual routine of updating and optimizing

the mech's internal layout. His previous experience along with his broad if somewhat shallow knowledge allowed him to make many minor modifications.

As a stationary mech employed strictly behind a defensive line, the base model suffered from an abysmally low RF and CF. Anything that penetrated past its relatively lackluster armor could easily cripple the Tryops.

While Ves considered doing nothing, his professional attitude forced him to at least give his variant a chance to survive. He spent quite a bit of time increasing the mech's redundancy, but focused mostly on increasing its internal compartmentalization.

His design was not meant to be a tank, and he didn't wish to compromise on the mech's offensive capabilities. This forced him to make a lot of compromises in order to insure his design possessed enough high capacity energy cells and solid heat sinks in order to complement its demanding weapon.

As the days went by, Ves continued to tweak and redesign the mech's internals until he became satisfied with what he had. The mech's survivability was never going to break any records, but now it could at least withstand a couple more potshots.

That left his variant's armor.

If Ves wanted to turn his design into a viable long-ranged ambusher, then he would have to make it much more difficult to detect. Even in a thickly forested environment, mechs could still detect other mechs.

If you thought about it, mechs were giant hunks of metal that generated a lot of power and heat. This gave a lot of mech designers headaches because an early detection could easily ruin an entire mission.

"The particle generator is no use in this case. It's hard to stay hidden if there's a giant cloud of sensor-blocking particles hovering over your hiding spot. It's like holding up a giant 'I AM HERE' sign."

Ves had to turn to Iron Spirit's catalog in order to find another answer. He entered the armor section and filtered out everything he didn't want. Nothing too heavy, nothing too light, nothing too obvious, he briskly threw away anything that failed to meet his standards.

He only came up with a couple of choices in the end. Ves simply picked the most effective one in dampening signals and containing heat. It also happened to be the least durable armor system, but you couldn't have everything.

[ArnodSys Co. GS Formula 15]: 250,000 bright credits

It cost a decent amount of credits, but Ves could afford it with Carlos constantly pumping out a Mark II every week. He'd been supervising his employee's work from time to time. Besides helping him out of a few tight spots, Carlos did a decent job in fabricating his silver label mechs.

The newly incorporated Living Mech Corporation charged around 30 million credits for each silver label mech. To be honest, for a lastgen mech with uncompressed armor that might have been a little much.

Still, without another production line, he couldn't ramp up his production. As long as Marcella kept the orders coming, Ves didn't mind pricing out the majority of his audience.

"The good times won't last." He reminded himself with a grim expression.

The prices of many raw materials already started the rise on the open market. Many suppliers already strained themselves by keeping up with the rising demand from their existing customers.

If the total cost rose by thirty percent, Ves would have to stop selling his silver label mechs. While he could still earn some profit with his gold label mechs, he'd be forced to lower his asking price over time.

"There's no future in lastgen mechs. I'll have to make the most out of the current buying spree."

Ves was essentially on the clock. He had to gather enough credits and merits in order to reconstruct the Dortmund and purchase all of the production licenses required to design a fully original mech.

He estimated that he only had two years at most, though the war could easily throw a wrench in his plans. Hopefully the Vesians would have the decency to delay their invasion until Ves finished his original design.

"Hah, fat luck that will happen." He laughed.

He resumed designing his training mech. He easily slipped back into the appropriate mood and shaped its armor using the newly purchased GS Formula 15.

As an armor system focused on stealth, it essentially focused on two fronts. First, it prevented the frame from leaking heat. Its inner layers cleverly absorbed excess heat and prevented it from radiating outwards. At the time of its invention, such a system didn't work too well in active battles.

"It's good enough if it works on a stationary mech. The armor system only needs to hide my mech before it fires a shot."

Second, it performed its most basic task of dampening various kinds of signals. It naturally took on a matte dark brown shade and hardly brightened up when someone flashed a light at it.

Besides dampening electromagnetic signals, it also limited the effectiveness of other kinds of systems such as sonar, motion and gravitic sensors.

Naturally, it only worked up to a point. Since Ves intended his design to fight at a distance, it should be adequate for its purposes.

This allowed Ves to build up quite a stealthy mech. The rifleman mech took on a dirt-colored angular design that frankly didn't look very pretty. It carried a strange but intimidating demeanor that made it clear the mech meant business. Ves opted not to add any flourishes in order to avoid ruining the effectiveness of its stealth coating.

"Now I'll have to add the particle generator."

Ves borrowed from his earlier implementation of a particle generator backpack module. He didn't recycle his earlier work but started from scratch. He managed to slim it down a bit even as he added in the familiar Festive Cloud Generator. Together with an outer shell of Formula 15, hardly any sensors should be able to pick it up.

Now that Ves completed the basic design, he subjected it to a whole barrage of tests. He never worked with stealth armor before, so the simulations exposed a lot of errors. Certain ways in which he shaped the armor turned out to limit the effectiveness of the dampening. Ves spent quite a lot of time revising the faulty sections.

He continued on with his work until Marcella finally called back.

"Good day Ves. I'm calling you in order to tell you that your ship is on her way to Cloudy Curtain."

"That's great news!" He cheered as he paused putting the finishing touches on his design. "I thought it would take a little longer in order to repair my ship."

"Me too, but the shipyard worked overtime. The boss decided to get involved in person. He practically fell in love with your state-of-the-art corvette."

They both chuckled a bit. Ves could understand the sentiment. He'd likely drool for hours if a cutting edge nextgen mech rolled into his workshop.

"What about the crew?"

"Your ship is staffed and ready to go, but..." Marcella's words trailed off.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Maybe."

Great. Ves wondered what Marcella pulled off. It sounded fairly serious if a smooth talker like her stumbled upon her words.

Chapter 158 Old

While Marcella's comment about the crew aroused some worry, Ves decided to deal with it later. His newly hired crew used the trip to Cloudy Curtain as the Barracuda's shakedown cruise, so Ves expected them to arrive a bit later than usual.

First, he had to finalize his latest design. He mainly dedicated his time with testing his semi-finished mech's stealth systems. After optimizing its stealth armor as best Ves could manage in a few days, he turned his attention to the detachable particle generator.

Ves intended to employ the particle generator as a smoke generator. Once the rifleman mech fired its high-powered laser rifle, it exposed its position. Even the most ramshackle thermal sensors would be able to sense the incredible amount of heat projected by the laser beam and track it down to its origin point. His mech might as well be waving around a gigantic signal flare.

Once its enemies zeroed in on its position, the rifleman mech would have to flee. Throwing up a giant cloud of interfering particles at the right time should allow the vulnerable mech to evade pursuit.

Ves mainly had trouble with getting the particle generator to disperse its cloud quickly. If it released its payload too slowly, then the mech's opponents could catch up before the module hit its stride.

His handy Jury Rigging sub-skill came to use as Ves employed a handful of unconventional means to enhance the spread of the particles. He also tinkered with the Festive Cloud Generator, forcing it to release a massive cloud of black vapor once activated.

Once he put the latest iteration to the test, the entire area within fifty meters became engulfed in a soot-like black miasma.

"It's like an exploding ancient chimney." Ves noted as he nodded his head in satisfaction. The speed, reach and density of the miasma finally met his standards. Unless the rifleman mech ran too hot, it should be able to use the cloud to withdraw.

Such a clever means conformed to the Dogged One's methods. Unlike the Instructor, the Dogged One lacked the fortune and destiny that could elevate him into a pinnacle fighter. He only managed to survive through stacking the deck in his favor by making his preparations beforehand.

"Honor is a luxury for the strong. The weak can only fight the strong through dishonorable means."

So what if it was shameless? All's fair in love and war! Different from the standard rifleman mechs, his mech only truly showed its strength when it had the initiative. The moment his variant lost its advantage, it should immediately run and shake off its enraged pursuers.

Once he became somewhat satisfied with the design, he put the finishing touches on its appearance. He left the coating alone but added in a diminished version of the LMC's logo.

While Ves might not have spent a lot of time on this design, he was proud of his work. He almost finished this project. It just needed a name.

He didn't think too much about it. He tried a few conventional ones but when he thought back on the Dogged One, they didn't fit. Ves spent half an hour wracking his mind on the issue before he ultimately settled on Old Soul.

"It contrasts nicely with the Young Blood."

As an immortal, the Instructor might be older than the Dogged One, but in terms of mentality and life experience the bounty hunter had an edge over the pampered former knight.

The name also reflected the Dogged One's lack of apprentices. He had never taught anyone the tricks of the trade, mostly because he couldn't teach others to survive without putting them through torment. He was destined to live out his life without family or friends.

Ves shook his head. He kept getting the feeling he went a bit too far with these myths. Even though they didn't exist for real, he still felt somewhat bad for giving the Dogged One such a joyless life. He couldn't come up with anything better with his average creativity.

He considered upgrading the attribute since he suspected it might come in handy when he designed more complex mechs. "Let's sit on it for now. First I have to increase my ability to survive."

Among other reasons, he designed the Old Soul to acquire some toys. While he might have to wait a few weeks or months until his DP earnings reached its cap, Ves was determined to purchase a permanent augment to his handy Privacy Shield.

"The Privacy Shield is pretty much a life saver. A good enough Privacy Shield will allow me to escape any threats once my shield generator fizzles out."

He still wore his partially depleted shield generator on his body. Its extremely compact energy cell only retained an eighty percent charge, and Ves had no way of topping it back up. His master had already warned him of the consequences should he tamper with it in any way.

Ves activated the Privacy Shield and rubbed his hands. "Well, let's get to it. System, please evaluate the Old Soul for me."

[Design Evaluation: Old Soul.]

Variant name: TOC-1S Old Soul

Base model: TOC-1 Tryops

Original Manufacturer: Rickshaft Conglomerate

Weight Classification: Medium-Light

Recommended Role: Ambush Rifleman

Armor: D

Carrying Capacity: D-

Aesthetics: C

Endurance: D+

Energy Efficiency: D

Flexibility: A

Firepower: A-

Integrity: C-

Mobility: D+

Spotting: B+

X-Factor: C

Deviance: 65%

Performance improvement: 17%

Cost efficiency: -17%

Overall evaluation: The Old Soul is an extreme ranged ambusher variant of the Tryops. It eschews frontal combat entirely in favor of ambushing unsuspecting enemies from a healthy distance. Its firepower and accuracy peaks at the extreme end of medium range, but it is also able to pose a threat at longer ranges. Its passive and active stealth systems provides the Old Soul with much-needed survivability.

[You have received 75 Design Points for completing an original design with a performance improvement of over 10%.]

[You have received 500 Design Points for designing a mech with a moderate presence of X-Factor.]

The initial DP reward lifted his mood, but he didn't particularly pay a lot of attention to it. With his growing fanbase, he mainly relied on sales to increase his points.

Now that he finished a virtual mech, he uploaded it to Iron Spirit and filled in the required paperwork. Ves held off on publishing it onto the game's virtual catalog. Instead, he leaned back in his chair and hailed his publicist.

"Gavin Neumann here."

"It's Ves. How is our publicity campaign doing so far?"

"It's going fairly well, though I'm starting to encounter some pushback. Around twenty-four percent of all game centers have adopted your training knight as a promotional mech. That's less than I thought but it's proven to be an effective draw for those businesses. The other game centers will budge sooner or later."

"What about this pushback you're mentioning?"

Gavin sighed over the comm. He sent a few documents over the link. Ves read through the messages and found that they contained all of the responses sent by the game centers.

"You can see that they are trying very hard to sound polite about it. Reading between the lines, the local managers know the value of the Young Blood to the locals. It's their superiors in Bentheim or Rittersberg who are putting a stop to their moves."

His publicist listed the parent companies involved and found that quite a few of them had connections to the Ricklin Corporation. "It's the stupid Ricklins again. They really hate my bones."

They couldn't do anything about the invisible suppression. As long as the Ricklins kept blaming Ves for what their wayward descendant had done, they'll just keep finding ways to inconvenience him. He also suspected they had a hand in the kidnapping and assassination attempt on him, but he couldn't prove anything.

"It's too difficult to come up with an explanation why the BLM and the Ricklins coordinated with each other. They should be enemies."

Or were they? The Ricklin Corporation was a quintessential Bentheim tech behemoth. Though it had ties throughout the entire Bright Republic, its headquarters and its main production facilities operated in the Bentheim region.

Thinking about it gave Ves a headache, so he stopped speculating about matters beyond his head. If anything fishy went on, the Republic would surely have their eyes on it already. Despite his minor prestige, Ves still remained a private citizen in the eyes of the Republic. People like him should keep their heads down.

"Why did you call me, boss?" Gavin prompted when Ves fell silent.

"Ah, I wanted to inform you that I've finished designing a virtual mech. It's a training mech that will round out my modest portfolio of training mechs."

Ves proceeded to introduce the Old Soul to his publicist. He particularly emphasized its extreme and somewhat unconventional fighting style.

"What are your thoughts, Gavin? Is it viable enough?"

His publicist paused to consider the matter. Ves already expected him to be taken aback. The concept of the Old Soul truly stretched the definition of a training mech.

"To be honest, the Old Soul doesn't sound like a training mech." Gavin finally replied. "It's too niche and one-dimensional, but perhaps you have a point that limiting the pilot's options will enhance their immersion. The only way to tell for sure is to release it onto the market."

"You hated mechs, right?"

"Yeah. That's why I know your mech will sell. I don't know if you'll only sell a couple of thousands or if it will catch on like the Young Blood and surpass a hundred thousand sales. Whatever the case, I'm sure you already have a brainless following of fans who eagerly snap up any design you publish, even if it's shaped like a walking turd."

As much as the mech industry focused on specifications and performance, the people who piloted them remained human. Gavin indirectly disparaged their irrationality when it came to deciding what kind of war machine they'd like to use.

"Be glad that mech pilots are human." Ves responded with a light reprimanding tone. "If every customer behaves rationally, they'd only

purchase the mechs sold by the trans-galactic corporations. Small-time companies like mine don't stand a chance in this aspect."

Even if Ves charged less for his mechs, he still couldn't have pulled off so many sales in normal circumstances. Through a variety of good publicity, Ves managed to carve a small niche in the notoriously hostile mech industry.

Ves proceeded to give out his instructions to Gavin. He wanted to maximize the early sales of the Old Soul in order to obtain DP quickly. He increased his publicist's discretionary funds for this purpose so that he could start promoting his latest design.

"I don't care how you do it, but try to drive sales as fast as possible within a month. I don't care about its long-term performance in the sales charts, so don't hesitate to pull off a trick or two."

Once Gavin understood his intent, Ves hung up. Now that he finished his work, he should get around to accepting a mission.

He entered Clifford Society's Mission Hall after logging in to the organization's virtual portal. Its interior evoked a martial feeling. From the bare walls to the flickering torches, everything seemed primal. Clusters of Society members had gathered in the giant hall. They all looked at the large displays and engaged in heated discussion on which mission to take.

A lot of missions allowed for teams. Many Society members banded together when they faced a challenge they could never complete alone.

Unfortunately, the Society's heartless Mission Hall refused to adjust its merit payout whether a single person or a massive twelve-man team completed the mission.

For example, if a mission rewarded a hundred merits, then if one person completed it, he received the entire amount. If a team of five happened to complete it, then they'd only get twenty each.

Sometimes, the teams decided on a different merit distribution. A team of four Squires and a single Knight might reserve eighty merits to the leader and only five merits each to the Squires. This highly unequal distribution illustrated the power of a Knight. Ves truly appreciated the opportunity of starting out with this lofty rank.

As an apprentice of a Master Mech Designer, Ves stepped forth in public with a measure of confidence. Even as other Society members started to note his presence, he approached one of the displays and browsed the missions suitable for Knights.

Chapter 159 Controversy

Missions generally came in two flavors. Ves could either accept a risky but rewarding mission or a safe but less worthwhile one. The latter often took up more time so many of the less talented mech designers took up these tasks.

As for Ves, he'd been eyeing the riskier missions. Though he cherished his life like any human being, he knew he couldn't get anywhere without taking calculated risks. The Clifford Society's whole advancement structure encouraged their talents to temper their skills in exotic adventures.

"A mech designer who holes up in his workshop all day will only stagnate." Horatio had told him once when he guided Ves around the Society. "Even if they managed to advance by some fluke, their designs lack an essential spark. The mech industry has no need for clones."

In other words, a mech designer has to seek out the untold wonders of the galaxy and survive experience. Only then would they be able to find their own paths.

Ves didn't know what to make of this theory. Leemar strongly subscribed to the idea that the best mech designers were those capable of surviving under the most adverse conditions.

"It's more likely that mech designers who thrive under danger are already outstanding."

Whatever the case, many people paid well to enlist the services of a competent mech designer.

As long as they had access to the right facilities, they could easily design or modify a mech tailored to the situation at hand.

They also served as consultants, able to deconstruct any design and explain its inner workings to their clients.

Ves wanted to finish a mission quickly, so he ignored any mission that lasted more than three standard months. He also wanted to avoid antagonizing more people, so he drew his attention to join an expedition into the unknown reaches of space.

Despite humanity's dominance in the galaxy, vast swathes of space had never been explored. Even if an unexplored star system fell under the borders of a certain state, it might take decades before they sent a survey ship to catalog its planetary bodies.

This applied even more to the Komodo Star Sector, which had only been colonized for over half a millenia. Many of the sparser regions unclaimed by even the poorest fourth-rate states might hide some gems. If some of these star systems happened to contain some deposits of extremely valuable exotics, then a follow-up expedition would swing by sooner or later.

"Hi there!" A cheerful girl chirped at him from behind. "You're a Knight, right?"

"That's correct."

"Great! Our team of five is thinking about taking the Hudson-Fairfax mission." She gestured at a couple of men and women a few steps behind. "We'll split

the merits equally as long as everyone is doing their fair share of work. So what do you say?"

"Hold on a minute, let me study the mission."

Ves quickly called up the mission in question. It turned out to be a rather thorny job that involved mediating a conflict between two rival fourth-rate states in the middle of nowhere. Instead of going to war, they decided to hash out their differences by holding duels.

He admired such a solution, but didn't wish to enter these muddy waters. Who knew if someone powerful had something to gain from the results. The three-hundred merit reward looked nice, but Ves could only look forward to receiving fifty merits if he had to work in a team.

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to decline."

"That's a shame." The girl replied, her smiles all gone. "Goodbye then."

A handful of other Society members asked if Ves wanted to join their teams before someone told him to stand elsewhere.

"If you aren't looking for a team, then don't stand in the center!"

It turned out the Society had a tradition where if you stood at the center, you expressed an interest in working together. Ves quickly stepped to the side of the hall in order to put a stop to the incessant questions.

He went back to the list of missions and zeroed in on risky expeditions to newly surveyed star systems. After a few minutes of uninterrupted browsing, he found something of interest.

Something called the Groening mission stood out from the list. Different from many other missions, the Groening mission explicitly called for a single mech designer. Ves wouldn't have to share his merits with anyone else if he accepted this task. He eagerly pulled up the details of the mission in question.

"Four-hundred merits. That's a lot, even for an expedition."

The mission immediately noted its peculiarities. It kept most of its details mum, including the expedition's route and destination. Anyone who accepted this mission had to trust in the expedition leader's judgement as he or she led the entire fleet into uncharted space.

Ves didn't mind the risk. He planned to tag along this trip with his newly crewed Barracuda. If anything happened, he could always get away with one of the fastest interstellar ships in the star sector.

"The expedition must be looking forward to an extremely valuable haul." He noted to himself. "Why hasn't anyone accepted this mission yet?"

Lots of value meant lots of risk. Evidently, the mission had already been posted for a couple of months. No one took the bait. Who would be crazy enough to go in blind? The obscenely high reward aroused everyone's vigilance instead of their greed.

There must be some kind of catch for the mission to demand a single mech designer instead of an entire team. There was safety in numbers, after all.

"Still, if the Clifford Society is willing to offer this mission, then it should be an authentic request."

Ves could do a lot with four-hundred merits. His shopping list was small, but all of the items cost a huge amount of money if expressed in credits. If he could earn a huge sum of merits at once, he'd be able to speed up his already fast-paced timetable.

He gulped down his saliva. After considering the pros and cons, he decided to accept the Groening mission. His comm instantly beeped an alert.

"Report to the Mancroft Independent Harbor within twenty days. Forfeiting the mission is not allowed. If you are delayed or indisposed, then please inform the Mission Hall."

Ves frowned at the message. He knew about the Mancroft Independent Harbor. It was an independent star system that pretended to be a fourth-rate state. It wasn't even a port system, which made it fairly difficult for ships to reach the star system. It only enjoyed a modest amount of traffic because the Common Fleet Alliance maintained a small fueling station.

"Twenty days will be cutting it if I take a conventional ship." Fortunately, a swift corvette could reach Mancroft from Cloudy Curtain in about nine to eleven days. "I still have some time."

From the sound of it, the so-called Groening mission required a lot of preparation. While Ves had already packed some stuff, he didn't feel confident at all.

"Hopefully my latest design is catching on. I need a lot of DP to buy some extra goodies."

His latest release was met with mixed reaction. Many of his fans ran to the game centers in order to try out the training mech. Others held off as they questioned the mech designer's sanity.

Joshua happened to be one of the fans. As soon as he left school, he returned home and hopped into his private simulator pod. He immediately bought the Old Soul with credits and entered the massive 100v100 Wartorn Instance with his newly purchased virtual mech.

He still took in the strange vibe that radiated out of his machine. Somehow, he felt as if the Old Soul was as eager to try out its capabilities as him. He certainly looked forward to trying out this eccentric mech.

"Training mech or not, you exist for a reason." Joshua whispered to himself and his virtual mech. "I don't believe Chasing Clouds has gone crazy."

Its release came as a bombshell. Cloudy Curtain's own mech designer suddenly published a new virtual mech, and it was a 2-star training mech! As soon as everyone heard those words, they got excited.

Once they looked at the Old Soul's specs, their enthusiasm quickly dashed. Almost all of his fellow classmates scratched their heads at the many limitations.

"You're not able to dial down the power of the rifle? Why don't you call it a cannon then! More importantly, even cannons won't stop after firing a measly six shots. How can this retarded design kill any mech with just six opportunities?"

"It's only able to fire once every two seconds. Do you know how long that is? By the time my next shot is ready, a skirmisher is already in my face!"

"This mech is completely helpless in melee! Only a wimp who never stepped into a cockpit in his entire life can come up with something so pathetic. It can't even win a knife fight against a 1-star mech!"

A lot of his classmates disparaged the mech, but Joshua had faith in his idol. Many of peers missed the Old Soul's incredible stealth, precision and power. Sure, it only excelled as a sniper, but wasn't that a great way to learn the ropes of a rifleman?

Of course, Joshua didn't need to play along. Due to his extensive tutoring, he already mastered the basics of marksmanship. His Old Soul leisurely stepped onto a heavily urbanized battlefield.

The battle this time entailed battling over a research institute. Both sides had to fight to maintain possession over the structure. Whoever occupied its grounds for ten minutes won the match.

"Let's find a good position."

Joshua separated from the crowd and lugged his mech towards the sides. He ducked down his mech or hid behind a corner whenever an enemy scout flew over his head. The Old Soul's passive dampening armor insured the scouts never noticed the sneaky mech.

"It's a lot better than I thought."

The welcome surprise emboldened Joshua to seek out a forward position. His fingers already itched to pull the trigger.

After several minutes of skulking he found a collapsed structure that looked over a burning spaceport. Joshua carefully controlled the Old Soul to crouch behind the debris. The mech settled in as best it could for a giant machine and waited for its prey to approach.

The massive conflagration released a huge amount of constant heat. The abundant thermal energy helped mask his Old Soul's presence.

His patient wait paid off when a trio of mechs came into view. One medium knight and one regular rifleman mech escorted a heavy four-legged artillery mech. It appeared the four-legged crawler wanted to find a good angle to bombard its enemy's rear.

"That just won't do." Joshua whispered to himself. After a brief moment's thought, he pivoted his rifle at the enemy's rifleman.

The rifleman posed the greatest threat to Joshua while also boasting the least armor. The knight and artillery mech on the other hand employed substantially more armor, to the point where Joshua doubted he'd be able to penetrate past their layers.

Joshua calmed down and regulated his breathing. His marksmanship tutor already hammered home the importance of maintaining control. His rifle

poked out a low depression of fallen rubble and aimed straight at the wary rifleman mech accompanying the artillery mech.

The Old Soul came to life. Joshua vaguely sensed some bloodlust as he waited for the rifleman mech to come into medium range. Advanced targeting systems went to work, providing Joshua with a prediction of his opponent's movements and its weak points.

A tiny shift caused the rifle to be pointed over the enemy rifleman's left chest. The Old Soul's sophisticated sensors detected marginally higher heat at that position.

Thirty seconds, twenty seconds, ten seconds...

The procession neared Joshua's position. Once they came into medium range, Joshua pulled the trigger.

The air thrummed as a narrow gout of light and heat blasted through the air and impacted close to intended target's chest. Only a small portion of the laser beam could be seen with the naked eye. Most of the energy fell outside the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum.

This basically meant that the Old Soul's laser beams looked deceptively weak. Unlike the more conventional laser cannons which blazed forth its payload with a visible swathe of violence, the Old Soul's highly modified laser rifle poked a narrow hole into its target like an unexpected crossbow bolt.

Seconds later, the stricken rifleman mech suffered a catastrophic explosion! The two accompanying mechs were caught completely off-guard as their companion's power reactor lost containment.

"Sniper!" The knight suddenly yelled and held its shield close to the startled artillery mech. "He's close! Shoot!"

The artillery mech's pilot quickly regained his composure and fired off an immediate volley in the direction of the laser beam's origin. The explosive shells covered a large swathe around the pile of rubble, turning the entire area into hell.

As soon as the first shells landed, Joshua triggered panic button. The Old Soul's particle generator quickly exploded into action and spurted out a huge amount of particles along with dark-colored vapor.

"Damn it! This smoke is in the way!" The pilot of the artillery mech cursed. "My sensors aren't picking up anything!"

While the enemy pilot considered bombarding the entire area with shells, Joshua had already made his getaway and waited for his rifle to shed its heat. He only fired a single shot, so it did not take too long for the rifle to become an unremarkable prop in the Old Soul's hands.

Joshua slowly circled his bewildered opponents. He set up his mech for his next attack. As long as his opponents failed to spot his mech, he insisted on pressing his advantage.

His rifle aimed at the bewildered knight's back. His skills and judgement combined with the Old Soul's targeting system made him target the lower back.

His rifle fired again. The narrow beam struck the knight square in its weaker rear armor and punched through until it struck the engine. The knight lurched as its movements hitched up. The attack hadn't killed the mech, but it succeeded in slowing it down.

The third, fourth and fifth shots exploited the vulnerability and took down the hapless knight.

Chapter 160 Feats

Joshua took down the enemy rifleman in one shot. The knight endured three more shots but fell after suffering another. The isolated artillery mech panicked after losing its companions and scurried back to base as fast as possible.

Sadly, heavy mechs tended to run at a crawl. Despite its lack of escorts, Joshua prudently slipped away. He shot five times in a single engagement and built up quite a bit of heat. His mech's internal heat sinks absorbed most of the heat so far, so his mech maintained a low profile.

"All of that heat will spill out if I stress the Old Soul's heat capacity."

The mech came with a very loud warning to never exceed this limit. Even if he had to let go of a juicy target, Joshua pretty much had no other choice.

He bunkered down his mech and waited patiently for the heat to disperse. Even as every other mech threw themselves into battle, the Old Soul stood as rigid as a statue, as if it knew its time hadn't come.

"It's different. It's the same." He muttered. The feeling of piloting any mech designed by Chasing Clouds always enchanted him. Other models felt cold and static compared to his home town mech designer's work. "It's like comparing a stuffed animal to the real deal. They're completely different even if they look the same."

While he didn't have the luxury of experiencing the Young Blood, the Old Soul felt like an unfeeling father. Sometimes Joshua shifted his actions without explanation, or start to question things when they didn't make any sense.

In hindsight, taking out two mechs in a matter of minutes should have been beyond him. Even with an overpowered laser rifle, a young potentate like Joshua wouldn't be able to kill a knight so easily.

He shook his head. "This rifle is amazing. It's able to melt through light armor in a single shot."

Every other weapon with comparable power weighed at least twice or thrice as much. The Old Soul's highly compact laser rifle allowed Joshua to wield it with much greater ease. Compared to all of these advantages, he completely didn't mind its limited heat capacity and enormous power drain.

Joshua resumed his hunt. He stalked towards the research institute, ignoring the couple of allies who wanted him to cover their backs. While it might help him out if he worked together with others, he kept longing for solitude.

"No one else will die if I screw up." He rationalized to himself. He frowned soon after. "It's just a game. Who cares about others."

Regardless of the reason, Joshua preferred to move alone. He slowly reached an open park. Above the trees, a couple of aerial mechs harassed each other with largely ineffectual rifle shots. Considering the skill level of the average Silver Leaguer, Joshua expected the stalemate to continue.

"They're not much better than I was when I started out with the Seraphim."

The main issue he had with the fight was that none of the flying mechs had the guts to close in. Joshua always learned from his tutors to be decisive and eschew battles of attrition. None of these dolts in the sky had learned proper aerial mech tactics.

His Old Soul found a convenient pile of crashed shuttles that gave it some cover against magnetic sensors. As the rifleman mech settled in, it aimed its weapon at the sky.

A minute passed by as the mech kept still. Every time Joshua wanted to pull the trigger, an impulse held him back. He somehow knew he wouldn't be able to take out his target. They moved too fast for him to land an accurate strike.

Even the Old Soul's targeting systems strained to predict the movements of these idiotic fliers.

"My mech isn't meant to hunt this kind of prey." Joshua painfully admitted.

"They'll swarm my position as soon as I shoot."

Flying mechs should be the Old Soul's fatal nemesis. They moved too fast to insure that any of its rifle's precious shots hit the mark. Even if Joshua activated the particle generator, his mech would easily be sniffed out by these perfect scouts.

Still, Joshua pushed back his unease and patiently waited for the fight to wind down. He knew that these mechs expended a lot of energy in their highly intense clash.

Just as he predicted, his side broke away first after one of their number fell. A trio of haggard-looking aerial mechs gave up on the duel and fled back to base.

The enemy team refused to let their opponents slip and chased after their prey. All of the fliers involved smoothed out their flight trajectories as they prioritized speed over evasion.

Joshua calmly tracked the opponent who lagged behind a bit due to battle damage. Once it crested over an apartment block, he fired.

The laser beam flicked out like a dark and struck the aerial mech's flight system. A veteran pilot would never fly his mech in a straight line, but Joshua's unfortunate victim obviously forgot that other enemies might be lurking on the battlefield.

The damaged mech lost altitude and crashed a block away from Joshua. All of the structures in the way prevented him from finishing the job. Instead, he patiently waited out the two seconds for his laser rifle to finish cycling and aimed the weapon at the faltering pursuers.

Just as they came around to the fact that they'd lost a companion, the Old Soul fired its rifle yet again. The laser beam struck the aerial mech square in its chest. Previous battle damage had already peeled away half of its layers. The beam burned through the remainder and carved a hole into the cockpit.

The dummy pilot inside the cockpit couldn't withstand the massive amount of energy. The dummy tragically evaporated into dust.

"You cowardly sniper!" The surviving enemy pilot raged from his mech. "I know where you're hiding. Prepare to die!"

Joshua fired twice at the incoming mech but failed to land a hit. Unlike his earlier victims, this guy remembered to dodge.

If the Old Soul possessed a normal laser rifle, then Joshua would be able to dial down the power setting and turn his rifle into a spitter. A rapid barrage of low-powered laser beams would enable him to track his opponent's flight.

Just as the enemy flier came into spitting distance, the Old Soul's particle generator released another charge. The thick and blurry cloud of black engulfed the flight mech in an instant. The pilot panicked a bit but quickly wrangled his mech back into control.

He guided his mech straight up in order to shake off the cloud. After gaining back some vision, the pilot tried to track down his hated opponent in order to avenge the death of his comrades.

"Where are you?!"

Had the sniper snuck away while he lost his vision? Or had the sneaky coward stayed in place, confident in the fact that no one could lay a hand on him under all of this smoke?

"Screw you!"

Just as the aerial mech flew away, a thin but deadly laser beam struck its vulnerable back and damaged the main power conduit that fed its hungry flight system.

It turned out that Joshua had lingered at the edge of the miasma. The Old Soul strained its sensors through the diminished concentration of particles and managed to pick up its opponent as soon as it ascended above the miasma.

With his prey losing altitude, Joshua directed his mech back into the miasma. With three shots left, he wanted to finish off the forcibly landed mech with a single shot. He carefully scoured the miasma and headed vaguely towards the middle.

He bumped into the crippled flight mech a few minutes later. The aerial mech incurred substantial damage from its harsh landing. While it tried to turn its rifle towards its hated opponent, the Old Soul moved first and fired straight through its damaged armor.

"That's four now." Joshua whispered to himself as he calmly dismissed his latest kill. "There's still another grounded mech."

The Old Soul hadn't reached its maximum heat capacity yet, so Joshua moved away from the dissipating miasma and tracked down his other prey. He found the crash site of the first aerial mech he shot and followed the debris to a shuttle garage where the wounded mech took stock of its damage.

"It's you!"

Joshua instantly silenced the enemy mech by shooting its cockpit. He didn't even need to adjust his aim in order to eliminate a sitting duck.

Cold satisfaction enveloped his being as he realized he shot down five mechs without suffering a single scratch. The Old Soul was a powerful mech in the right hands.

"This isn't a training mech. It's a killing machine."

He spent the next few minutes cooling down his mech before trudging towards the research institute. The match had reached its zenith as both sides tried to occupy the institute grounds.

Joshua lurked at the flanks and waited patiently for prey to come. He picked off three additional mechs in succession when they fled the carnage. The damaged mechs were easy pickings as Joshua took them out with grim satisfaction. His remarkable contribution tilted the balance against his opponents, and his team succeeded in winning the match.

As the battlefield winked out, he leaned back against his pod. He thoroughly stomped the enemy team. None of them had expected to face a sniper on the battlefield. That might change once this model gained more popularity.

His virtual body left the cockpit now that the match had ended. Before he returned to the lobby, a strange message popped in front of his face.

[An agent of the designer of your mech requests permission to utilize your battle footage for promotional purposes. No credits or in-game gold will be exchanged. Do you wish to accept or deny this request?]

It took a few seconds for Joshua to parse the request. If he understood it correctly, then someone who worked for his favorite mech designer wanted to use his footage in a commercial.

"Oh yes! I accept!"

In the game centers throughout the planet, a new set of ads appeared. It showcased the best moments of the Old Soul in action. Curious visitors looked up at the projections as the distinctive mechs started to carve their enemies to pieces in just a couple of shots.

"Is that the new mech?"

"What the? Is that a rifle? It packs more power than a cannon!"

"Those stealth systems are unreal! They're walking right past that mech without a clue!"

Gavin Neumann looked on as the action-packed footage started to sway the crowd. He smirked contemptuously at the people who disparaged the same model an hour earlier. He hadn't even edited clips himself. Instead, he left it up to an automated program, which selected the most intense moments out of every battle record it received permission to borrow.

"I don't even have to lift a finger at this rate." He noted as some of the potentates started to hop inside their sim pods in order to emulate the incredible feats. "How can these idiots be trusted to defend our borders when they're easily misled by some cherry-picked footage?"

He opened his comm and pulled up the sales record of the Old Soul. As a publicist working for the LMC, he obtained a limited amount of jurisdiction in the company's virtual account. The numbers started to pick up from the dozens into the hundreds, and this was only the first day.

"They're all sheep."

The publicist knew that he had to promote his employer's latest design with a different approach than the Young Blood, which possessed a heroic bearing.

The rifleman mech's boring appearance and extreme specs turned off many potential customers. Thus, Gavin set out to ignore the masses and instead focus on the handful of talented pilots who knew what they were doing.

As expected, those who employed the Old Soul's advantages to the fullest racked up an incredible score. If he served them up to the skeptical masses, they'd start to question their first impressions and try out the mech for themselves.

Sadly, not everyone got the hang of the rifleman mech's quirks. Gavin took a look at the statistics and saw that its win rate ranked near the bottom of the pile.

The Old Soul required a specific mindset and set of skills to make the most out of it. Forget about skill level, most of the teenagers who tried out the mech lacked the patience to employ an ambush strategy.

He shook his head at their predictable behavior. "Musclebound idiots."

Even if a handful of angry customers started leaving bad reviews on the model's sales page, it didn't diminish its growing momentum. At this early stage, none of the game centers selected the Old Soul as their 2-star promotional mech. Everyone who tried out the mech this time had spent their hard-earned credits or gold to purchase the trending mech.

"This is all I can do for now, boss. We'll see whether your variant catches on as a training mech."