

Mech 161

Chapter 161: Molgon

No matter its actual sales performance, the Old Soul succeeded in rousing the locals. It turned into a ready-made conversation starter as people started to argue against or in favor of the so-called 'training mech'.

Many people who tried it out fell flat. Some walked away discouraged, while others persisted in their efforts and tried to master their new purchase.

Those like Joshua who trained rigorously were able to showcase the Old Soul's incredible potential. They gave hope to the masses that the model held a lot of potential. The mech's notoriously high learning curve turned from an impassable obstacle to a cliff that could be scaled.

Gavin's ads accelerated this trend by celebrating the most amazing plays. A few local prodigies even piloted the Old Soul for the sole purpose of showing up in a globally aired ad. Anyone worthy enough to appear in one of these ads enjoyed a lot of renown.

Thus, in a warped way, a lot of potentates began to polish their marksmanship after school. Anyone who failed to kill five mechs in a single Wartorn Instance match did not deserve to be called an elite.

Whatever the case, the DP started rolling in for Ves. He might reach the cap of 50,000 DP by the end of the month at this rate. "Too bad my model hasn't caught on abroad."

Only a few hundred virtual mechs got sold outside Cloudy Curtain. Beyond the initial sales, its momentum stagnated as the Old Soul's unimpressive specs and bad reviews left a foul impression.

In any case, the controversy surrounding the virtual mech succeeded in raising the profile of the Living Mech Corporation. Even the most remote villagers learned about the new mech manufacturer. Its modest catalog of virtual and real designs showed that the company had a lot of promise.

Almost everyone rooted for the company and its talented owner. No one wanted to see Ves fail in his ambitious venture. He became his home planet's sensation, to the consternation of some of the established powers.

"Events are proceeding in an unfavorable direction. The rising tide of military fervor will hinder our plans to ride the waves of the coming war."

"We are only two-thirds done with our preparations. We can ill afford a new variable."

"Let us wait until we convene the full group. We need to decide on a proper strategy to tackle this thorny problem."

Unaware of these shadowy threats, Ves invited everyone involved in his business. Ves sat on a sofa, cradling a still-recovering Lucky. His gem cat slowly repaired the battle damage suffered from their last encounter by consuming half of his mineral feedstock.

Calsie and Gavin sat together on another sofa. The two students chatted comfortably with each other. Raella and Melkor stood nearby, keeping a wary eye on Dietrich, who Ves had invited to the meeting on a whim.

Dietrich responded with a charming smile. "I don't know why you're looking at me this way, babe. I'm Ves' bosom friend. I even saved his scrawny ass from pirates!"

"I'm not interested in lowlife like you." Raella snorted at him before turning to Ves. "We've waited long enough. Let's get this show on the road, please."

"Alright." Ves responded, looking at each of his friends and employees in turn. "You're all here because I want you to know that I'll be gone for a few months. I've accepted a high-risk mission which will likely take me beyond chartered space. The highly confidential nature of my assignment leads me to believe that communication will be highly restricted for the duration."

"Woah, sounds like serious danger. Do you even know what you're facing?"

"Not yet, but the high remuneration leads me to believe that the risk of death may be real."

Dietrich looked more and more impressed. "You sure grew some balls last time we travelled together. Even I would step back if I'm faced with such a vague offer."

"It might be a little stupid of me to throw myself headlong into danger, but I'm confident that I'm up to the challenge." Ves explained. His bulging DP account gave him quite a few options should he face some sort of setback. "Besides, the organization I'm part of won't send me out to die."

The entire group digested his news with mixed emotions. His cousins already knew about his plans but underestimated the threat level Ves was willing to face. Even Raella started having second thoughts on her decision to accompany him on this expedition.

"What will happen to the workshop?" Carlos asked with an uncertain tone.

"You'll be proceeding with business as usual. I've been checking your work, and I'm satisfied with how far you've come. Keep coordinating with Marcella to fulfill her orders. In exchange, I'll be opening up my database for you. As long as you fulfill your daily quota of work, I'll allow you to peek at some of my books."

Carlos lit up at that news. While Ves learned most of his knowledge from the System or from the Clifford Society's exclusive libraries, he also purchased a handful of extremely expensive textbooks. Ves wouldn't get into trouble if he let one or two people borrow these virtual books.

"I won't fail you, Ves."

"Good. Coordinate with Melkor if the workshop is in danger. You're both in charge of the workshop's safety while I'm gone."

Ves turned to Calsie and Gavin. "The two of you will be in charge of our public relations. I don't want to return three months later facing a hostile crowd and taxes that have been jacked up through the roof. When will you approach the Republican Commissioner?"

"We can schedule an appointment with his office a week in advance." Calsie informed him. "Will you stick around to meet with him in person? This will go a lot easier if you talk to him face to face."

"I'm short on time. You're young, but you don't need my presence to back you up. Your work so far has impressed me a lot. Once you graduate, you're welcome to take up the mantle as my company's lawyer."

The offer certainly impressed the young girl. To be honest, Ves knew little about law outside of what he learned in his business classes, but he pretended otherwise in order to instill more pride.

A lot of things might happen in three months. He discussed the possible worst case scenarios with his friends and made sure they understood his intentions when formulating a response.

"What about me?" Dietrich asked. "So far, you've all been talking as if you're playing a business sim. Where's the exciting the part?"

Ves composed his face as he considered his friend. "We're friends, right?"

"Sure we are! Didn't I mention that earlier?"

"Then I'd like you to do me a favor." Ves requested and pulled the so-called Little Boss closer before summoning up his Privacy Shield.

The pair discussed something discreetly for a minute before Ves pulled down the Shield.

Dietrich slapped his back and smiled. "Don't worry Ves. I'll keep my eyes out."

With nothing else on the agenda, everyone dispersed. Ves and Raella had already packed their luggage. Everyone knew what they were doing and they'd be able to keep his Living Mech Corporation afloat without his presence hovering over their heads.

Once they stepped outside, a small armed convoy of shuttles awaited them in front of his workshop. Ever since the last attack, Ves decided to stop travelling on an unsecured commercial aircar.

"Perhaps I'll have to design my own shuttle." He idly wondered as he stepped inside the vehicle while holding Lucky.

Raella followed him inside and gazed at the sturdy armor fittings. "This looks pretty impressive."

"SASS always delivers, though I'm paying out of my nose to keep them happy."

Once they settled in, the procession ascended into the air. Just as they started to accelerate towards Cloudy Curtain's spaceport, Ves felt a familiar sensation brush against his sixth sense.

It tasted like a dark blizzard that raged across an entire continent. The force of this destructive wind engulfed everything in its way in an unstoppable avalanche of wind and frost.

Though the flavor had changed, it still brought the specter of death. "Sniper! Attack! Get down!"

Sanyal-Ablin's professionalism kicked into gear. Even as Raella looked at Ves as if he lost his mind, the escorting security officer immediately activated an unknown protocol.

Every shuttle descended with force, just as a flaming projectile slammed into the vehicle transporting Ves. The entire upper section of the shuttle tore apart from the incredibly powerful collision. The stricken vehicle lurched in the air as the pilot bled out of his ears.

The split-second descent had saved Raella's life. Ves had already jumped on top of her body in order to envelop her fragile body within his shield generator. They hadn't escaped danger, though, as his antigrav suit suddenly morphed into a vacuum suit.

"Poison!"

Ves cursed a bit because he knew his Shield Generator had to let in some air. His assassin came up with a clever solution to counter his strongest protection. If he didn't own a highly advanced and extremely expensive antigrav suit, he'd already be choking in his breath.

Instead, Raella remained exposed!

For all of her complaining and rebellious attitude, the woman was a Larkinson. She recognized the danger as soon as Ves mentioned poison. She clung to him while shutting her eyes and pressing her palms against her ears. She also held her breath, which allowed her to escape the worst of the effects so far, but that didn't help much if the poison spread through skin contact.

Lucky had also sprung into action. The alarmed cat activated his energy claws and tore out much of the damaged sections. This gave Ves enough of an opening to jump out of the slowly crashing shuttle while carrying her cousin.

Everyone else had already started to respond to the threat. One of the shuttles exposed a nozzle and sucked in all of the surrounding air, hopefully taking much of the poison with it. Another shuttle picked up the VIPs and brought them back behind the safety of the workshop's walls.

The workshop's entire security suite had flared to life. One of the turrets swung in the railgun's direction and fired off a destructive volley of shells.

The projectiles exploded upon impact, shattering the entire house in a shower of splinters and debris. The few residents present nearby screamed and ran away. A large stream of bots flew into the air before fanning out. Even as SASS began to sweep in the direction of the house, they also kept their eyes peeled for other threats.

Meanwhile, the shuttle carrying Ves flung open its doors, allowing a security officer with medical training to hose down the entire interior. Ves deactivated his shield generator, letting the fluid splash over his full-bodied suit.

He still fussed over Raella who started to show a lot of worrying signs. Despite her quick reaction, the poison had obviously found purchase in her body.

"What's going on with her?!"

"She's inhaled a significant dose of Molgon." The medical officer replied as he affixed some kind of tool over her mouth. Ves couldn't figure out what any of his instruments did. The lack of understanding scared him quite a bit.

"Is she dying?!"

"She's in a bad place but she'll make it. Whoever wanted to poison you stayed within the limits. Molgon isn't instantly fatal and can't be absorbed through skin contact, though it's extremely difficult to synthesize an antidote. However, I've stabilized her body. I have to bring her back to our branch office immediately."

The panic died down a few minutes later. SASS hadn't found any trace of the culprit, but they found pieces of a high-powered railgun in the wreckage of the house.

A heavier convoy of shuttles and mechs descended onto his workshop a moment later. They departed moments later. A handful of doctors already worked over Raella's reddening body.

Ves had to stay and let a bunch of experts isolate his body and take away his antigrav clothes. His worry was tempered by the fact that whoever ordered the hit didn't go too far.

One of the security officers informed him that if the assassin used something more dangerous, he'd be violating the MTA's guidelines against the use of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Once the MTA got onto anyone's tail, they usually suffered a brutal end.

He gritted his teeth at the thought of losing a family member. Perhaps he'd been too soft lately. He was tired of being someone else's punching bag.

Chapter 162 Ships Crew

The journey to the Mancroft Independent Harbor had to be delayed. Ves along with the entire attack site had to be scrubbed clean in order to remove every trace of Molgon. As soon as he checked out, he boarded a more heavily armed shuttle along with Melkor and travelled to Sanyal-Ablin's headquarters.

Seeing Raella's still and vulnerable body being scanned and prodded by various kinds of medical instruments brought their moods to a low point.

"Will she be okay?" Ves asked softly.

One of the doctors nodded. "Miss Raella is a resilient mech pilot. Her implants and gene treatments have also contributed to her survival. It's a good thing your various countermeasures have activated so early. She'll make a full recovery after half a year of therapy."

Various coincidences allowed Ves to survive this attack unscathed, but he couldn't say the same to Raella. He resolved to gift his cousins at least one set of spare antigrav clothes. He already had a closet full of them so it hardly made a dent.

Ves had to cough up two million credits to pay for Raella's treatment, and that included a heavy discount. SASS must have felt a bit sorry for being caught off-guard by the assassination attempt. In any case, it was money well-spent as Miss Robyn assured him they treated Raella with Coalition-standard technology.

"Now that Raella is out of action, do you need me to take her place?" Melkor asked with a tone that suggested that he'd rather watch over of his cousin.

"No. I'm sure my client arranged his own security arrangement. You're better off keeping watch over my workshop. I don't want people messing around with my stuff while I'm gone."

Even if Ves forced Melkor to go along, the mech pilot would constantly worry about Raella. He decided to leave him at home and bring someone else. The only problem was that Ves didn't know anyone else who could take Raella's place.

Surprisingly, Melkor rejected his suggestion. "Your premises are already quite secure, and I'm confident nothing will happen to Raella. I know you need someone to watch your back, so don't refuse my presence."

"Alright. I'll arrange your mech to be moved to my corvette."

A few moments later, they entered a press room. A number of local reporters gathered here after passing stringent security checks. Their camera bots hovered behind their heads, ready to stream the upcoming press conference to the entire planet.

The attack at his workshop was one of the most dramatic events that had happened in recent history. Every citizen of Cloudy Curtain feverishly spread their gossip as they awaited some sort of official response.

The anemic local police services only issued a perfunctory statement while they were running around like headless chickens. This inadvertently gave Ves the chance to shape the narrative, according to Gavin's media savvy instincts.

Ves nodded at Gavin as he walked over to him. "How's the public taken it so far?"

"They're restless, excited and outraged." Gavin grinned, as if the assassination attempt actually pleased him. "The media aligned to the ruling coalition is already pressing for calm, but almost no one but their diehard supporters are paying attention to those channels. We've got a large portion of the population ready to cling to your words."

While Ves found it distasteful to take advantage of this situation, necessity compelled him to follow Gavin's suggestions.

They were in the light and their enemies were in the dark. No one stepped up to claim responsibility for the attack. In addition, events that happened in Bentheim and beyond might as well be on the other side of the galaxy as far as Cloudy Curtain was concerned.

"Good afternoon." Ves greeted the cameras as he stepped up to the podium. "Thank you for attending this press conference. My name is Ves Larkinson. I am an Apprentice Mech Designer under the tutelage of Master Carmen Olsen of the Vermeer Group. I recently founded the Living Mech Corporation here in my home planet of Cloudy Curtain."

All of the reporters already knew his background, but many of his viewers might not be aware. He deliberately mentioned his master's name in order to

borrow some of her prestige. It forced those who normally dismissed low-tier mech designers to regard him seriously.

"Can you tell us what happened this morning?"

"Certainly."

Ves gave a brief and factual account of the sequence of the events. Various recordings had already leaked onto the galactic net, so no one learned anything new. He also left his shield generator and antigrav clothes out of his story. No need to give his enemies any ideas.

"Who is responsible for this terrible attack?"

Ves tried to maintain a composed expression. "I don't know, but I can think of several possibilities. Various people would like to see me gone. For instance, the ruling coalition has worked hard to ram a new tax bill through the Planetary Assembly that will drive me out of business."

Technically, he didn't lie. He let the reporters and the viewers who watched the broadcast connect the dots themselves. Even if it was on spurious grounds, everyone loved a conspiracy theory.

The Greens and the White Doves could issue as many denials as they wanted. It didn't change the fact that they regarded him with hostility. Could they have been responsible for the attack? Ves didn't think so, but he was willing to drag them through the mud anyway. Let the public decide the final verdict.

He continued to spin a misleading narrative that Gavin had carefully constructed. Ves had already received some coaching on what to say and what to leave out. Everything he said rang true, and thus should pass scrutiny should someone employ a sophisticated lie detector program.

Once he reached the end of the conference, he left behind a final statement. "I survived today not because of luck, but because this is my home. Don't believe in the naysayers and pessimists that we're only good for feeding Bentheim. The Living Mech Corporation's presence here represents my belief that we can be strong."

His words took everyone by surprise. Ves left the reporters behind as they digested his eloquent response. He nodded to Gavin who smirked like a cat who got the canary.

"You did an excellent job, boss. You didn't stumble on your words at all. The only fault I can find is that you've been acting a little too lively for someone who survived an assassination attempt."

"I can't help it." Ves chuckled a bit. "I keep thinking about how many mouthfuls of wine those loathsome politicians will spurt once they see my performance."

It thoroughly burned any bridge he had between him and the ruling coalition, but Ves didn't care. He bought himself some time. According to Gavin and Calsie, his performance should thoroughly pull the wind out of the sails of the tax reform bill.

One day later, a heavily armed convoy escorted by two aerial mechs landed inside a cordoned-off section of the spaceport. Several security officers accompanied by many bots kept their eyes peeled for trouble.

One of the central shuttles opened its hatch, allowing Ves, Melkor and Lucky to step outside. He turned to an escort and nodded his head. "Thanks for the ride."

Ves turned to the other side of the field and walked towards the parked corvette. The Barracuda regained her former glory after undergoing repairs. Her rear thrusters looked as pristine as the first day she came into his possession.

He also met the Barracuda's crew for the first time. A group of five stunning-looking women greeted his eyes. Even Melkor halted for a moment after seeing them together. Even as they dressed themselves in a formless blue uniform with the logo of the LMC plastered to their sleeve, they still looked like angels.

"Hello." Ves awkwardly said. "I'm your new boss."

"We know who you are." A redhead with the only hat replied. "Captain Amber Silvestra, at your service."

"First Class Engineer Ushra Jacobson, at your service." A dusky-skinned woman said.

"First Class Pilot Miranda Pham, at your service."

"Ship Security Officer Angie Sipos, at your service."

"Able Spacer Jenn Malcom-Stahl, at your service."

The way they spoke 'at your service' revealed they received extensive training. Ves could tell that they used to say those same words with charming voices and enticing smiles.

None of the women composed themselves as anything other than professionals today. Ves already got the lowdown from Marcella.

Evidently, the women worked for a company that operated luxury yachts. Among their regular duties of keeping the ships afloat, they also pampered their clients. A severe dive in fortune for the sleazy company forced them to let go of half of their employees, which included this tight-knit group of highly trained women.

Ves should feel lucky for snapping them up without giving up too many concessions. The total monthly salary they drew only amounted to thirty-five

thousand credits a month, plus some extra hazard pay. He spent a lot more money keeping the Barracuda in tip-top shape.

Captain Silvestra gave him enough time to regard his new crew before speaking out again. "Just to be clear, sir, we expect to be treated with decorum. The prevailing employment laws gives us the right to refuse any unlawful or inappropriate orders."

"I have no ulterior motives." Ves sheepishly replied while raising his hands. All of the confidence he exuded during the press conference left his body. "The only thing I expect from you is to run the Barracuda."

Your corvette is an amazing ship. She's in the right hands. Let's get you all aboard."

As they entered the hatch, Silvestra reported the ship's condition. Ves barely understood the significance of her words. Still, they came fully stocked and prepared for a trip that might take them far from civilized space.

"How's our fuel situation?" He asked once they entered the central corridor. The crew dispersed to their stations.

"We're fully topped with high-grade fuel. Our mutual friend Marcella arranged a channel that we can use to procure a limited amount of fuel. It's not fully condoned so don't spread the word."

He nodded and let his strange crew do their jobs.

Captain Silvestra took the captain's seat while Ves and Melkor sat on the observer's seats. They strapped themselves in case of a bumpy ride.

"Do I have permission to lift off?"

"Go ahead, captain."

Under the expert control of their pilot Miranda, the corvette retracted her landing gear and slowly flew up into orbit. The well-built ship hardly shook as

its thrusters worked hard to escape Cloudy Curtain's gravity well. A larger ship might have trouble accomplishing such a task in standard gravity conditions, but the small and sleek corvette possessed ample thrust.

"We've currently reached orbit, sir. Your orders?"

"Set course for Mancroft Independent Harbor. We're due in eighteen days."

Silvestra turned her seat to look back at Ves. "Do you wish to save fuel? We can save up to thirty percent of our fuel expenditure if we make short but frequent hops, though our FTL drive will also wear down faster."

Ves took a minute to mull over the question. Previously, he only needed to set the autopilot, allowing the ship make all the choices. "I'm not an expert, so I'll defer to your judgement. However, I can't arrive late, so I think it's best to play it safe."

"Very well, sir."

Captain Silvestra turned back to instruct Miranda to plot a course to Mancroft. The pilot cross-trained as a navigator so she expertly plotted a series of FTL transitions that took them through safe and well-known star systems. Unfortunately, the closer they got to Mancroft, the less settlements they'd find.

"The border regions are highly chaotic. Pirates as well as alien raiders frequently appear in this part of space."

"That bad?" Ves responded with a frown. "I thought the Common Fleet Alliance is supposed to keep a lid on the border."

Both the captain and the pilot looked at him like an idiot. "Space is big. Unimaginably big. To put it simply, it's a giant space which largely consists of nothing. There's no way any fleet can intercept an incursion."

"I heard the CFA possesses sensors capable of detecting any FTL transitions across many light-years of space."

"Even if they're able to detect them, they don't have the numbers to pursue every probe. They only muster up a couple of warships if they encounter a strong enough signal. The handful of corvette and frigate-sized vessels that routinely pass through the border practically do so with impunity."

It turned out the fleet assigned to the Komodo Star Sector possessed a lot less functional warships than their propaganda always suggested. It couldn't hold a candle to the core fleets stationed in the center of the galaxy.

"So in short, we're constantly at risk of encountering something dangerous."

"That's correct, sir. However, the Barracuda is one of the swiftest corvettes in this star sector. We can outrun any threats as long as we don't travel along a predictable course."

Ves nodded ruefully. He once navigated straight into a pirate ambush.

Chapter 163 Untamed Stars

Miss Miranda plotted a brisk course that brought them to Mancroft within seventeen days. She wanted to alternate between short and long hops in order to test and calibrate the brand new FTL drive.

"The core of the galaxy is familiar with this generation of FTL, but it's new technology to us. We need to establish a baseline so that we'll know how far we can push it. Corvette-class ships are especially known to have a generous threshold."

"And a threshold is?"

"How near we can transition into a star system. The threshold is mainly dependent on the relative mass between the ship and the destination's star."

"That sounds kind of dangerous." Ves apprehensively noted.

"Good thing we have a First Class Engineer, sir. Ushra has plenty of experience with pushing FTL drives to their very limits. Our former clients liked the thrill of jumping in deep."

Ves took her word for it. He hired them on exactly because he wanted more options in case they ran into any trouble.

While all of the crew engrossed themselves with their tasks, Ves and Melkor had a lot of time in their hands. Melkor sighed as he followed Ves out of the bridge.

"Raella probably would have loved to befriend your crew."

As the only two men on the ship, they both felt a bit out of place. Ves sighed. "I guess we're relegated to passengers. Let's prepare for the upcoming expedition. I don't know what kind of role you'll be able to play, but make sure you're ready to roll out if needed."

They passed the time in peace. Melkor spent most of his time down in the cargo bay. He used the cockpit of his rifleman mech as a simulator pod and feverishly trained his ability to shoot in zero-G conditions.

Unlike Dietrich's Harrier, Melkor's Stanislaw model lacked a flight system. Unlike the Old Soul, Melkor's rifleman was meant to fight a running battle. It featured a robust and powerful engine, allowing the Stanislaw to weave around various obstacles while spoiling the aim of its opponents. Its rapid-fire laser rifle excelled at wearing down mechs at medium range.

"Whoever was in charge of its maintenance did a great job." Ves declared once he finished going over the mech. It hardly required any tweaks.

"The Larkinsons know their mechs. We employ some of the best mech technicians in Rittersberg, you know."

Since Ves didn't have anything else to do at the moment, he returned to his stateroom and lazily browsed the galactic net. A bored Lucky jumped on his lap and made himself comfortable.

The ship's quantum entanglement node allowed Ves to keep in touch with the rest of the galaxy. He closely followed current events on Cloudy Curtain. The recent happenings along with his first press conference left people scrambling for answers.

The complacency on the part of the White Doves and the Greens left them ill-prepared to the sudden shift in public opinion. A large swathe of neutral citizens who never paid attention to politics became passionately involved once one of their own got hurt.

Ves found it rather funny that he ranked higher than the leaders who ruled the planet for many generations. The pacifists along with the consortiums standing behind them founded Cloudy Curtain and built it up into a quiet and idyllic farming planet over more than two centuries. Even now they directly or indirectly employed over half the population.

Despite all of their efforts, the founding elites garnered very little appreciation of the common folk. Their greed and their attempts to stall the development of what they thought was their own private playground worked against them this time.

All because of mechs. The current zeitgeist of this era revolved completely around the majesty of mechs. Even the lowliest of farmers and menial laborers were swayed by their primal urge to worship these gods of the modern age.

"Why does Bentheim attract all of the attention? We don't even have our own mech arena!"

"I told you that the man keeps pushing us down! The fat cats up in their towers drink their million credit wines every day while average folk like you and me can't afford a house!"

"Mechs! Mechs! Mechs! I want to see more mechs! I want to see them with my own eyes!"

"All of these mech heads have gone crazy! I can hardly walk my dog these days without hearing constant discussions on mechs."

Even the Pioneers started to join the bandwagon. They self-servingly took up his cause as if they never attempted to take advantage of him. Ves didn't know what to make of their support, but he welcomed their efforts anyway.

In any case, the White Doves and the Greens started to push back against the rising tide. Perhaps aware for the first time that ignoring the masses was a bad idea, they started talking about their upcoming plans to increase the planet's infrastructure spending.

In their words, the tax reform bill is needed to pay for better schools and hospitals. Every wealthy business has to make some sacrifices in order to increase the planet's quality of life.

Mysteriously, a lot of exemptions disappeared. In exchange, the bill subjected many industries to a less outrageous maximum tax rate. The clever maneuvering made it more difficult to say that the White Doves and the Greens favored their own little circle of friends over an outsider like Ves.

That didn't change the fact the Living Mech Corporation had to pay forty percent of its profits to the planet's coffers. While this sounded a little more reasonable compared to the previous rate, it still exceeded Bentheim's rate.

"These guys just don't know when to give up."

Hardly anything could compete against free goodies. Even the allure of mechs might lose out to personal benefits.

"We should strike while the iron is hot." Ves concluded, and his employees concurred. They already arranged an appointment with the Republican Commissioner. Hopefully his obligation to ready the planet for war won out against his restraint to favor one side over another.

The only time when everyone came together was when Jenn served dinner. As the most junior spacer on the ship, she generally handled the miscellaneous duties that didn't require a specialist, which also included cooking.

Jenn certainly knew her stuff, as every dinner had been sumptuous and filling. Everyone loosened up a little at this time, enough for Ves to pry open their mouths on why they decided to take up this post. He learned that they all earned generous tips in their previous jobs.

"It's never meant to be permanent." Ushra said. "We knew what we were getting into. It's one of the few opportunities commoners like us can afford our training. Do you know how expensive my engineering courses are? I'm thankful my old boss paid for it all."

All the other women had similar stories. Even if they possessed a small amount of talent, they lacked the opportunity to get into a decent school.

"You don't have to feel sorry for us. Our previous boss took great care of us. It's a shame he got caught taking bribes. When a bunch of us got laid off, we decided to quit the service industry."

"Why choose to crew the Barracuda instead of something larger or more professional?"

Captain Silvestra smiled at her crew. "We like to stay together. Our experience with pleasure yachts has left us with very few job opportunities.

We don't have the qualifications to take up senior positions in passenger ships or transports. Those who offered to take us on all expect us to take up our former duties again."

Angie, their security officer, snorted in irritation. "Those slimeballs are ten times worse than our old boss. At least he ran a clean ship because he wanted to cozy up with the bigwigs. The other bosses in the service industry have powerful gangs backing them up. That lets them get away with certain things."

No one gave any examples, but Ves could make a few guesses. The major gangs that ruled most of the Bright Republic's underbelly didn't behave anything like Walter's Whalers. These weren't the cuddly ruffian hometown heroes who only beat up people once every month.

No, these shady enterprises ruled over a vast underground network that earned them billions of credits each year. With this much money at stake, none of these organizations pulled their punches.

"Well, I'm glad to have you with me." Ves admitted, feeling the need to reassure his crew that he didn't intend to operate in the same way as the service industry. "I don't expect to be travelling a lot with the Barracuda, but whenever I do, we might be heading towards danger."

"We don't have a problem with that." Silvestra replied with a casual expression. "Our training combined with the capabilities of your Arkon-class corvette will see us through."

Ves had the feeling they might even come to embrace any crisis that might pop up. Resolving difficult situations would certainly prove that they were good for something more than flirting with the rich.

Personally, he didn't mind if they wanted to pad their resumes. As long as they stuck around for a few years, Ves was willing to grant them several

allowances. He knew he wouldn't be able to motivate them with his charm, so he could only use obvious incentives to motivate his crew.

"Do you happen to be familiar with the Mancroft Independent Harbor?" Ves asked.

"It's a typical frontier den out here in the most remote corner of the galaxy. A bunch of ex-pirates, mercenaries and desperate merchants have made themselves home there. They make their living by exploring the uncharted stars on both sides of the border."

"What about the sandmen?" He pressed, this time mentioning the aliens who occupied the stars just over the border next to Mancroft. "Those silicon-based lifeforms are known to be extremely aggressive against humans. I'd figure they'd be livid if a bunch of fortune seekers rummage around their territory."

"You aren't wrong, but the situation is a bit more complex." Silvestra replied with a serious expression. "The human race has a tendency to look at space as something we own or something that other races own. It's an incredibly simplistic way of looking at the effective territory we own."

"How do you see space, then?"

"A vast sea of unimaginable distances, dotted with the occasional islands. Every island is a star. Every race can only really exert their influence on solid ground. No one is able to claim the vast seas."

"I see. So the sandmen have a different perspective on the border than us?"

"They're pretty weird in many ways. What else can you say about a huge collection of tiny sand-like creatures? In any case, we suspect that the sandmen don't even know their own borders."

No one knew how the sandmen organized themselves. Only a bit larger than a grain of sand, they acted much like insect hives. Individually, they were

weak and inconsequential. They grew much scarier once they clumped up into a gathering the size of a mountain.

Researchers have found that the sandmen combined their processing power into hive minds when that happened. The larger the group, the scarier their thoughts. Sadly, they never appear to possess emotions, and could hardly outthink a six-year old human child.

Their native, incomprehensible technology was the only reason why humanity took them seriously. Certain anomalous sandmen centered around a core of various kinds of exotic materials somehow managed to develop a workable form of FTL.

This turned the race into a menace, as each major invasion saw entire planets engulfed in waves of sandmen who propagated easily. They normally multiplied slowly by absorbing the energy of a sun, but whenever they encountered an active power source, they ballooned in numbers.

"The sandmen normally don't bother with most small vessels. The CFA thinks that they are constantly weighing the amount of energy they have to expend compared to what they might gain if they catch an intruder. Anything that results in a net loss of energy means that they won't lift a finger."

Ves found Captain Silvestra's explanation fascinating. Despite the state of total war between their two races, the sandmen didn't often pose a threat. Outside of their major extinction-level invasions, they were content to hold on to their existing territories.

"It's likely my mission will take us into sandmen space. Do you have any advice you'd like to share?"

"Yeah. Take a good look at the fleet you're going to be a part of. The larger the ships, the higher the chance you'll provoke a reaction from the sandmen. No one knows why, but they're just as capable of detecting ships in FTL as

the CFA. The little creepers probably took over a CFA flagship and reverse engineered our technology."

That sounded fairly important. Perhaps the Barracuda would be able to outrun the sandmen, but if his client wanted Ves to stay on his own ship, then he might be stuck with the rest.

Chapter 164 Extra Lesson

According to the CFA, the sandmen thought on an entirely different level. To these intelligent clumps of sand, everything consisted of either matter or energy. They viewed the human race and their many ships and settlements in the same way as a rock or a tree.

Though humanity only had a limited glimpse on what went on in their core territory, it appeared they lacked a complex society. Their culture was nonexistent and their society consisted of a one-dimensional hierarchy based on the value of their composition.

"They're not a race we can talk to." Captain Silvestra said as everyone finished their dessert. "It's either kill or be killed. Energy weapons aren't very effective but high impact damage will do the job."

"Since they're so dangerous, why do people keep invading their space, if you can call it that?"

"As a silicate-based lifeform, they're extremely obsessed with rare and valuable minerals. Their higher castes have a tendency to hoard exotic minerals for years before processing them or shipping them to their core territories. As long as you're not afraid to die, a strike group can easily overwhelm a smaller colony and make off with a large amount of exotics."

While the larger conglomerations of sandmen posed a great threat, the smaller groups tended to be slow and stupid. As long as the raiders left before reinforcements arrived, they stood to gain a handsome profit.

Everyone dispersed after dinner. Ves got a lot more stuff to think about. The dangers and opportunities one could find in the border region could easily enrich a daring prospector.

Much of the space in the core regions of the galaxy had already been mapped out and claimed by various powers. Only at the vast rim of the galaxy could someone change his fortunes after stumbling across an untapped windfall.

Midway into their journey to Mancroft, Ves received a surprising call.

Master Olson personally summoned him to her virtual abode. He immediately dropped whatever news program he idly watched and connected to the one-time address he'd been given. His stateroom's top-quality projectors strained to portray the majesty of her surroundings.

Ves beheld the famed Titanium Garden for the very first time. It existed both in real space and in virtual space, and both looked magnificent in different ways. The virtual version looked like an endless three-dimensional titanium garden.

The virtual garden had no up or down. Small plots of soil rested atop titanium enclosures which themselves connected to other plots via various vine-shaped titanium lattices. The mixed orientation and the fact that the water that flowed between them never fell outside their channels made it clear that gravity worked inconsistently in this space.

Despite the mind-boggling complexity involved in its construction, the entire garden appeared to exist in harmony. Ves did not get a headache even after he tried and failed to derive some pattern out of the random environment.

A soft clap interrupted his thoughts. He moved his body and saw that his master rested on a divan in the center of an alien garden. Blue grasses and red leaves swirled around her position like how planets revolved around the sun. The moving foliage presented him with an enchanting sight, especially when the plot appeared upside-down in his perspective.

"Come on down." Master Olson said, gesturing her carefully manicured hand towards another bench that appeared from the grass. "There are a couple of matters that we must discuss."

It took some time for Ves to figure out how to flip his perspective and land on the bench. He looked up at Master Olson like a schoolkid eager to begin his first lesson.

"How are you today?"

"I'm good. I'm currently on my way to Mancroft."

"I am aware of your mission." She responded in an elegant fashion, the many jewels adorning her head tinkling with a distinct melody. Her brilliant blond locks flowed with the wind, which markedly contrasted with the blue and red foliage. "It is not to be taken lightly."

If his master went out of her way to call him directly, then Ves might be in danger. "Is the Groening mission that dangerous?"

Her cool eyes continued to bore down on his sitting form. "Do you know that I have been nurtured by the Vermeer Group for more than eighty years?"

He nodded.

"I started my training in a batch of thousands. In order to meet the expectations of the Vermeer Group, we competed directly against each other for resources and attention."

Ves hadn't heard about this at all. Her public biography only briefly mentioned a dry statement that she had been nurtured by the Vermeer Group in a secretive experimental training program. Ves wondered why she narrated her own back story.

"Compared to my brothers and sisters, I was not the most intelligent nor did I make the most friends. Yet after eighty years, only I am able to reach the Master level. Do you know why?"

He shook his head.

"I treated myself harshly. Where my rivals studied five courses, I studied ten. When they gained some experience by taking an easy mission, I took an assignment that sent me straight to an active battlefield. I never slacked off in my pursuit for knowledge and power."

Ves started to understand why she told him this story. "Every great mech designer has worked hard to reach their positions."

"Hard work is not sufficient." She gently chided him. Her eyes grew chillier by the second. "Ruthlessness is needed above all. Everyone starts the same. Only by subjecting yourself to pressure will you be able to break and reforge yourself into something more than human. Only by reaching beyond the limits imposed by our flesh will you be able to reach the Senior and Master level and craft many wonders from your mind."

It sounded like she referred to some great secret or truth. Ves started to get a little lost. "So is it a good or bad thing that I'm taking the Groening mission?"

"Let me put it this way. Your current chances of survival is less than twenty percent."

Ves wanted to argue her estimate. It sounded exaggeratingly low and likely didn't take into account his System-derived advantages. Yet even with a couple more tricks, how much of a difference did they make?

"To be frank, this mission is rather ill-conceived." She heartlessly continued. "Your client is relies too much on borrowed intelligence, and therefore instinctively assumes no other threat exists. Unfortunately for you, it is too late to forfeit the mission."

It sounded like even Master Olson became concerned. "What are your intentions? Do you want me to back out anyway?"

Backing out of a mission that he already accepted pretty much ruined his standing with the Clifford Society. Ves would suffer a heavy blow, but at least he'd be able to survive. Unlike the other Society members, Ves had access to other channels such as the System and Master Olson's own organization.

She looked at him with disappointment. "Have you been listening?"

Ves started to sweat as he put his mind on her words. What did she mean? She started telling him that she began her training program along with many chosen. In the end, only she had been able to reach the eminent status of a Master Mech Designer.

"I see." The answer became obvious. "The greater the pressure, the more you gain."

"As long as you survive."

"I won't back out then." He replied with a firmer tone. Even if he lacked some confidence in himself, he still believed in the power of the System.

Master Olson smiled as if he gained her approval for the first time. "Very good. Now that you have shown your resolve, I'm willing to pass on some of my teachings. You will find it very useful in your upcoming mission."

His eyes shone wide at her boon. He never expected his master to teach him this early. The value of a single session from a grand Master Mech Designer was immeasurable!

"Before I start my lecture, there is one more lesson you need to learn."

"Yes?"

"Do you know what happened to my rivals once I reach the Master level?"

Ves never heard of anyone who rose up in the Vermeer Group in the last couple of decades. Had the Vermeer Group forced them into obscurity?

"I killed whoever remained alive. Even the Vermeer Group had to stand aside." She responded with a modest grin that hinted at a great amount of enjoyment. "Do make sure to deal with your enemies thoroughly if you ever find yourself in a position of power."

Her words aimed right at his heart. Ves made quite a lot of enemies, from Carter Gauge to the Ricklin Corporation. Many of these influences completely dwarfed his own. Even if they constantly threatened his life, Ves could only keep his mouth shut.

That might not hold true in the future. When he eventually rose up to become an influential mech designer, he'd be able to contend with the most powerful influences on an equal level.

That was when he should retaliate in earnest. Master Olson wanted him to never forget a slight.

Still, Ves couldn't quite believe that all of her competitors deserved to die. He refrained from following up with another question. Best not to provoke her any further.

Once she made sure that Ves understood her lesson, she began to lecture him about mechanics and the connection between force and energy.

After a brief introduction, she changed tack. "Let me ask you a question. Why do mechs still resort to low-tech armament such as swords and shields? In human history, there was a time when melee combat has phased out. Much of our current non-mech technology such as tanks and spaceships rely exclusively on the power of their ranged weapons. Why do mechs operate on a different paradigm?"

Ves already learned the answer in his previous studies. "Because mechs possess enough armor and mobility to circumvent a force that completely relies on fighting its opponents at a distance. When an enemy gets close enough to punch you in your face, a railgun won't be of much help."

"The key here is to recognize that the confluence of unique properties allow for the anachronism of melee weapons to play a role. Do not disdain their use. So long as mechs are fast and resilient enough to withstand a number of laser beams or kinetic projectiles, there will always be a use for close quarters combat."

Many experts once predicted that the need to resort to primitive weapons would phase out with the development of deadlier firepower. Mechs would become more civilized just as humans evolved from using clubs to using guns.

Over the past couple of centuries, the power of lasers, ballistics and missiles had indeed grown in power.

The difference between the first generation and the current generation of weaponry was substantial. Even the cheapest currentgen laser rifle could bore a hole through the sturdiest first generation mechs.

Yet those who developed better armor systems never fell behind for long. After they exhausted the means to develop more resilient armor with conventional alloys, they resorted to developing incredibly resilient armor through the use of exotic materials and techniques like alloy compression.

"Since the level of firearms and armor has advanced to significant heights, how are melee weapons able to keep up?"

Ves knew the answer, though he didn't learn this from any of his courses. He possessed a decent amount of experience working with various generations

of mechs, from the 1-star Fantasia to the 5-star Caesar Augustus. That gave him a lot of perspective on the gradual evolution of mechs.

"The amount of force exerted by mechs have also increased over many generations. The average size and mass of mechs increases bit by bit every year. The power of their engines and the effectiveness of their artificial musculature has also experienced several breakthroughs."

"That is correct." Master Olson nodded. She sprinkled her fingers, which summoned up a projection of various designs. They all focused upon the methods in which they provided the limbs with mechanical force. " Now, let me open your mind to the power of battle mechatronics."

Chapter 165 Mancrof

Ves learned a great deal from Master Olson's personalized lecture. She tailored her teaching to him in a way that constantly challenged his assumptions while never straying beyond his capabilities.

She loved to illustrate her point through examples. Many times, she brought up various designs and noted what they did right and what they did wrong. Then she changed to a different but somewhat similar design and prompted Ves to do the same.

While he didn't always answer correctly, the speed in which he internalized her lessons surpassed her expectations. His rapid progress allowed him to go through a lot more topics.

"Battle mechatronics is the study and application of machines purposed for war." She noted at the start. "In the mech industry, this specifically refers to designing and optimizing a mech for melee combat."

Any mech designer with ambitions to design an original mech required some knowledge of battle mechatronics. It provided them with a number of

approaches on how to design and shape the overall frame in a way that maximized its power and efficiency.

Ves learned many different methods on how to apply his new knowledge. He learned to look at mechs with a different eye. He could tell how fast a mech could run by the length and configuration of its legs. He could also estimate the amount of power a mech would be able to exert from the proportions of its various limbs.

Besides refreshing the basics, Master Olson focused much of her valuable time on teaching him how to toughen up a mech. Ves already learned to increase a mech's integrity through increasing its redundancy and compartmentalization. Those worked best at mitigating ranged damage.

No matter how much he increased a design's RF and CF, it all meant nothing if a huge impact shook the fragile internals. Certain sensitive parts such as processors and tiny mechanical components wore out really fast if subjected to heavy shock.

Master Olson therefore taught him how to mitigate these impacts by hardening the most sensitive components. Besides adding a large amount of buffer materials, he also learned few clever design tricks that could dampen and negate heavy impacts.

At the end of the session, his master looked at him with a tired but satisfied expression. "You have a very bright and focused mind. You're a perfect pupil. It is unfortunate that you have passed the optimal age for me to induct you as a core disciple. You must walk your path on your own."

Ves didn't mind her regretful words. He cherished his freedom. Becoming her core disciple meant he'd be able to obtain a lot of opportunities as well as frequent tutoring from one of the greatest mech designers in the star sector. Anyone else would kill their mothers for such a chance.

"I'm grateful for your efforts, master. Your teachings have truly opened my eyes."

The specific content of her lecture went beyond the basics of what he might learn from a course in Leemar. Master Olson added quite a bit of personal insights in her teachings.

As a specialist in mechanics and engine design, she possessed a unique design philosophy on how to design a mech. Master Olson heavily favored designing mechs that were built to last. Experiencing such a perspective from an eminent master was a privilege enjoyed by very few mech designers. He essentially started with a leg up from his competition.

Once Master Olson cut off the call, Ves sat back in his stateroom and internalized what he learned. His master had also passed on a supplementary textbook that provided him with the underlying data and formulas to apply the various methods.

Fortunately, it didn't come with the ridiculous security measures that the Clifford Society liked to use on its more valuable books. As Ves already understood the essence of the field, he only required a week to master its contents. He called up his Status.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 33,216

Attributes

Strength: 0.8

Dexterity: 0.8

Endurance: 0.8

Intelligence: 1.8

Creativity: 1

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

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

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Apprentice - [Structural Pathway Configuration II]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman

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

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression II]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

[Physics]: Journeyman - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II]

[Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization III]

[Melee Weapon Optimization II]

Abilities

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

Evaluation: A young but foolhardy mech designer who braves danger like a moth drawn to flame.

His Status hadn't changed much. He mainly noted that he earned a fair bit of DP. His virtual mechs sales continued to grow apace since he departed from Cloudy Curtain. While the sale of the Young Blood had already slowed down, the Old Soul started to gain a cult-like status.

"The mech trainees consider your rifleman model to be a milestone that they need to master." Gavin told him in a regular report. "Anyone who isn't able to employ the Old Soul in its intended role is regarded as trash."

Ves didn't know what to think about his words. He knew that Gavin had a hand in encouraging this behavior. His task was to drive up the model's sales.

In any case, it didn't sound very serious and it might benefit the young potentates in the future if they mastered the Old Soul's patient piloting style.

What Ves noted next on his Status was that Battle Mechatronics turned out to be a main skill. Technically, it incorporated many insights from Mechanics, Electrical Engineering and even Computer Science in order to provide it with a foundation on how to design a mech from scratch.

Thus, Ves considered it to be a fusion skill of some sorts. Without a sufficient foundation in the three foundational skills, he'd never be able to master Battle Mechatronics so easily. Still, even if his Computer Science skill fell behind, his current focus on hardening the internals required little knowledge in that field.

He considered sparing some of his ample DP into shoring up this lacking skill, but shook his head. "I don't think I'll need to mess with the programming of a mech anytime soon. It'll be important once I begin to design an original mech, but for now there's little use."

A day after he reached Apprentice-level in Battle Mechatronics, the Barracuda finally made its way to the Mancroft System.

A dim red dwarf star in the center of the system provided pathetic amounts of light to its anemic pair of planets. Red dwarfs were considered the runt of the

galaxy, the cheap mass-produced version of a star that burned extremely slow but lasted quite a long while as a result.

None of this mattered much except to illustrate the star system's overall lack of value. The only true satellite of any consequence was its gas giant. The yellow pearl-like planet contained significant traces of an essential ingredient in the synthesis of high density ship-grade fuel.

The fact that such a common red dwarf possessed such a valuable gas giant caused plenty of people to scratch their heads. It was as if an old farmer had married a gorgeous supermodel.

"That's the CFA's fueling station. Best not to go anywhere near that place." Silvestra noted as she switched the main display to a close-up to the station in question. It orbited lazily over gas giant. A fair number of harvester vessels flew down to the upper layers of the gas giant and gently scooped up some gas before returning home.

A small patrol of warships made sure that nobody would have any ideas on the station. It consisted of two destroyers and a small flotilla of frigates, enough to threaten any casual pirate incursion. No matter how many mechs swarmed the patrol, the warships would quickly tear them to pieces with its abundant rapid-fire cannon turrets.

It took only a couple of hours for the Barracuda to traverse past the orbit of the gas giant and enter the inner system. A red dwarf massed fairly light, which meant that ships of any kind would be able to transition closer to the center. This saved everyone a lot of time.

"We're thirty minutes away from the Mancroft Independent Harbor. Whatever poses as their traffic control is already hailing us." Captain Silvestra reported to Ves.

"Has anyone else sent a message to us?"

"Besides the usual unwanted solicitations, no, sir."

"Then do what you think is best."

She nodded to him and turned back to send a brief reply. "We'll take up orbit around Mancroft I and keep our distance from others. I suggest you make sure your pilot cousin is ready to enter his mech at any time. We might need to show some muscle from time to time in order to deter the scum from having any ideas."

The ramshackle space station acted as the only other populated presence in the system. No one bothered to colonize the ugly grey planet it orbited, so every ship in the neighborhood flocked to the so-called independent harbor.

The space station had a mundane history. Shortly after the CFA built its fueling station, a gang popped out of nowhere and funded the construction of a passable space station. Led by the Bosey Clan, this group possessed enough strength and foresight to hang on to power and turn their little space station in a regular stopping point for fortune seekers.

"All kinds of people flock to the galactic rim." Silvestra explained with a patient tone. Ves would just keep asking if she didn't answer. She summoned a couple of auxiliary projections that showed the other ships in orbit. "The line between scavenging and pirating is often blurred this far out from any central authority. Even the CFA can't do much about to enforce the law in these parts."

The galactic rim encompassed billions of stars and many light-years of space. The portion that fell under the purely administrative borders of the Komodo Star Sector already encompassed many millions of stars. Even if the regional density of stars was low, many treasures could be found so long as you picked the right star.

"How are the Boseys still in power?" Ves curiously asked. Some of the vessels in orbit looked large enough to field entire companies of mechs. If every ship in orbit disgorged their mechs, they'd surely be able to overwhelm the space station.

"They never pushed the line. The Boseys know that people can easily choose to go somewhere else to perform their trades, so they don't even bother taking a cut. They make a decent living by buying low from treasure hunters and selling high to their contacts back in civilized space."

It sounded smart. Their generous treatment allowed them to make lots of friends.

"The Mancroft System is fairly close to the border. Has the space station ever been attacked by the sandmen?"

"Never. Red dwarfs are a dime in a dozen. They're dim, so they don't provide the sandmen with a lot of energy. Its low mass also makes it hard to navigate. Furthermore, they're also poor in resource endowments. Therefore, sandmen rarely bother to visit red dwarfs like Mancroft."

No wonder the Boseys chose to construct their space station in this system. It not only has easy access to premium fuel, it also provides safe harbor against the sandmen.

Since no one else hailed his ship, it meant his client must be somewhere else at the moment. With a few days to spare, Ves considered paying a visit to the space station. This was the true frontier of human space.

"Is it safe to visit the harbor?" He asked, gesturing towards the large but aging space station and the handful of ships currently docked in its piers.

"Not without an escort or some assurance." The captain replied. "The Boseys might control the station, but for all their pretenses of declaring the harbor a fourth-rate state, it's still a den of thieves."

"That's a shame." Ves knew better than to tempt fate. Already he could feel invisible eyes staring at his brand-new ship. A shiny Arkon-class corvette presented a very valuable prize to those who valued absolute speed. "Keep me posted on any incoming hails."

With nothing else to do than wait, Ves returned to his stateroom and resumed his preparations. Ever since his master warned him about the dangers, he stopped treating the mission like a vacation.

Chapter 166 Clien

Two days later, the Mancroft System welcomed an intimidating fleet of vessels. Over ten different spacecraft of various sized revolved around a sizable ship the size of a jumbo transport.

The flagship was a bona-fide mech carrier. Her mech carrying capacity surpassed all the other ships in the system. Like a queen returning to court, the carrier trudged slowly towards the inner system with her escorts leading the way.

Ves received an alert from Captain Silvestra and entered the bridge. "That's a really big ship."

"She's a military surplus fleet carrier. She's meant to carry over two companies of mechs."

Her length from bow to stern reached two kilometers. She took on a long but fairly stubby profile, which reduced her efficiency when transitioning to FTL but allowed her to carry large amounts of mechs and goods in her abundant holds.

"Frankly, she's not a ship that should thrive out here in the rim." Silvestra added, disapproval apparent on her face. "Three or four civilian large transports can carry the same load as that carrier with a fraction of the cost."

The amount of money that you have to spend on fuel and crew to keep this boondoggle running day by day must run in the millions of credits."

That made Ves regard the former fleet carrier in a different light. Her flamboyant orange and pink coating made it clear that no government authority currently commissioned the ship. A private outfit must have snapped up the vessel and turned her into a mobile base.

There must be thousands of people crewing the ship and her many mechs. Even in a heavy populated system such as Bentheim, the large amount of mechs could certainly pose a threat.

About half an hour after the emergence of the carrier fleet, the Barracuda received a new hail. The flagship directly sent some codes along with the message that made it clear that the newcomers had some connection to the mission.

"Accept the hail. Let's see if they're the ones I'm supposed to meet."

The central projector lit up and displayed the upper body of a uniformed bridge officer. "Greetings. Am I speaking to Mr. Larkinson of the Barracuda?"

"That's correct."

"Lord Jeremiah Kaine has been expecting your arrival. We'd like to cordially invite you to attend a banquet aboard the Ark Horizon. Our ship will dispatch a shuttle at the appointed time, so please maintain your current orbit."

"Understood. I'll be ready to attend the banquet."

The communications officer cut off the hail after a perfunctory goodbye. Ves stared at the display and counted the number of escorts that flew around the Ark Horizon. How many more ships would join the fleet in the coming days?

"Your thoughts, Silvestra?"

His captain shook her head in disapproval. "A conventional fortune seeker rarely needs an entire fleet carrier to explore the frontier. You can't make a profit if you are saddled with too many assets. This doesn't look like a normal expedition at all. It seems to me that they're prepared to conduct a full-blown raid into hostile territory."

That made some sense, but Ves believed there had to be another reason. "Lord Kaine requires the services of a mech designer, and I doubt it's because he wants me to optimize his mechs against the sandmen. There are plenty of specialized mechs on the market that do a better job."

Not anyone would hire a mech designer on a whim. For a mech designer to do a good job, the client has to provide him with an intimate understanding of their current disposition of mechs. If their blueprints and other essential data fell into the wrong hands, they'd be vulnerable to targeted attacks.

In any case, his boss summoned him to his ship, so Ves had no choice to attend. He left the bridge and informed Melkor that he should dress appropriately.

Ves planned to bring his cousin along as a guard. To be honest, it was pointless for Melkor to act as a guard because as soon as they entered the belly of the beast, they'd be completely at the mercy of Lord Kaine's security contingent.

"I just want to make a statement to my client. Wherever I go, you'll be following closely behind. If I'm supposed to work on Lord Kaine's mechs, then I will likely stay aboard the Ark. I'll request your Stanislaw be moved to the Ark Horizon if they still have space."

"What about the Barracuda?" Melkor asked with a touch of concern. "She's an extremely expensive ship. I don't think it's a good idea to lose her only deterrent against bad intentions."

While his cousin might have a point, Ves had other considerations. "Your rifleman mech lacks a flight system, so it won't be of much use in defending my corvette. The Barracuda is fast, nimble and observant. She won't be letting anyone get close in the first place."

Besides having a trustworthy family member at his side, Ves also wanted to borrow his keen perception. Perhaps his cousin might pick up on something.

"They'll confiscate my visor if I bring it aboard their ship. It's customary for guests to bring in only a minimal amount of electronics when they visit someone else's spacecraft. I will replace my current visor with a low-tech version that will pass their inspection."

Ves didn't even know that Melkor owned another visor. "If that's what you think, then go ahead."

They returned to their own rooms to prepare for the upcoming banquet. Ves already wore his antigrav clothes, so he simply changed its setting to a fancier looking outfit. After that, he sat on his bed and petted Lucky who wandered over his lap.

"I'll have to bring you along as well." He told his cat. "Stick close to me and don't nose around too much. I doubt our hosts will appreciate your presence if you make a stink."

Lucky meowed at him indignantly, but quickly resumed his purring when Ves stroked his back.

Although he appeared calm, Ves actually had a lot of concerns. A major expedition made a lot of noise wherever it traveled. "One thing is for sure. Lord Kaine has a lot of money to throw around."

His client must have promised the Clifford Society a lot of things in order to offer the mission to its Knights. This gave Ves an idea of what kind of returns

Lord Kaine was aiming at. You don't fund a massive fleet carrier in order to pick up a few rocks.

Ves could speculate all day, so he busied himself with rereading Master Olson's latest textbook. Even if he mastered most of the theory, he still wished to brush up on its more abstruse concepts. The book hinted at many possible directions a mech designer might choose to pursue.

For example, Master Olson pursued the limits of endurance. Ves didn't have a good grip on her exact design philosophy, but from the examples he browsed from the galactic net, she obviously preferred to design mechs that lasted long and could take a beating.

As a fairly recently ascended master, she only just started to spread her wings in the upper echelon of the mech industry. Ves knew that once a master reached the pinnacle of their field, they shored up their other skills in order to broaden their knowledge.

Master Olson hadn't yet finished that stage, so most of her models remained fairly one-dimensional in their properties.

Nevertheless, her extreme focus on this aspect bled through to Ves. Having experienced a lecture and reading through a textbook that she personally penned, he gained a lot insight on how to prolong the operating time of a mech.

Considering the vast undertaking this expedition represented, Ves had a feeling he might be hard pressed to apply his new methods.

Time slowly passed as the procession of ships reached Mancroft I and took up a high orbit around the lifeless planet. A dozen different shuttles disgorged from one of the carrier's hangar bays and approached the ships that continued to guard over the capital ship.

One of the shuttles approached the Barracuda. The slim short-ranged spacecraft smoothly came to a stop next to the docking hatch of the corvette. A thin collapsible jet bridge extended from the sides of the hatch and carefully mated with the hatch on the shuttle's sides.

Ves and Melkor made their way to the docking hatch. Melkor figured out the functions of his recently gifted antigrav clothes and adopted a similar look as Ves. As promised, he also exchanged his tricked out visor for a more basic model which nonetheless did a decent job at obscuring his face.

Lucky came along for the ride as well. Currently, he lounged over Ves' shoulders.

Angie Sipos, his ship security officer, stood by on the other side of the reinforced hatch. She donned an armored vacsuit and held a menacing shotgun.

"Whoa there. We're not going to war today."

"Sir, I'm just making sure. This is how I earn my paycheck."

Ves understood the precaution but he didn't expect any trouble this time. Once the jet bridge finished connecting the two spacecraft together, the inner hatch slid open, allowing the two Larkinsons to enter.

Once they left the ship proper, the inner hatch closed and the outer hatch opened. This allowed the pair to slide along the bridge. Ves momentarily felt surreal, especially when his body ceased to be subjected to artificial gravity.

The jet bridge offered transparent windows out into open space. As Ves floated in zero G, he felt as if he never truly understood deep space until now.

"It's not natural for humans to live in space."

"The spaceborn argue otherwise." Melkor responded as he allowed his antigrav clothing to whisk him forwards towards the other end of the bridge.

"Humanity rules over half the galaxy. Our race has ceased to become dependent on land and soil in order to survive."

Humans born in space possessed a different perspective than others. The most extreme among the spaceborn had never set foot on a planet or even a moon. Most of them formed a phobia of large planetary masses. They constantly worry about getting crushed by a planet's immense mass, even the laws of physics wouldn't allow such an absurdity to take place.

Ves shook his head and patted Lucky's head. The cat curiously stared out into the window as well. "There's nothing wrong with being a primitive landborn. No matter how far we've come, we can't forget our roots."

His short passage ended when he reached the other side of the shuttle. Its outer hatch opened, letting the two Larkinsons inside. Once the outer hatch slid shut, the air started to cycle while a large host of scanners went to work. Both of them expected the scans and allowed them to perform their tasks without a fuss.

Some of the scanning modules beeped and focused on Lucky before moving on. Once the scans had ended, they finally entered the shuttle. The air and temperature abruptly changed as they stepped inside.

A security officer garbed in a familiar blue uniform greeted Ves with a salute. "Mr. Larkinson and Mr. Larkinson, I'm pleased to meet you two. Please enter and take a seat. It will be a short journey to the Ark Horizon."

"Thank you. I look forward to meeting Lord Kaine in person."

As the Larkinsons strapped into their seats, the security officer received another message. "Ah, my apologies, sir, but I have just been informed that your mechanical pet is capable of posing a threat to others aboard the Ark Horizon."

"My cat is here for my safety." Ves replied in a firm tone. "He has saved my life several times. I don't wish to be separated from him."

"I assure you that we have the safety and security of our ship well in hand. My colleagues aboard the Ark wishes to inform you that your cat will have to wear a specialized harness that our technicians are fabricating at this very moment. It won't affect your pet's movements, but it will restrict its claws and allow us to track the creature."

Ves accepted the compromise. He had faith he could dismantle the harness if he ever needed Lucky to show off his deadly prowess, but it would take some time. For now, Ves had no choice but to accept the reasonable restrictions.

As the shuttle departed from the Barracuda, Ves looked around and noted that the shuttle approached another ship. The shuttle could comfortably carry around sixteen passengers in its current configuration.

Over the next hour, a small number of oddly dressed men and women entered the shuttle. They wore a mix of flamboyant garments over skintight vacsuits. In space, no one dared to live without wearing a vacsuit or something similar. In the event of explosive decompression, you'd still be able to survive in harsh vacuum space once the vacsuit enclosed your head.

Most of the newcomers appeared to be the ship captains and corps commanders of the various escort forces. Their hardened gazes bore down on Ves and dismissed him as a threat once they took in his physique. He didn't carry himself as a soldier or a mech pilot.

Ves had mixed feelings at being dismissed so easily. Instead, they turned a wary eye towards Melkor. His cousin met their gazes with a cool expression, or at least that was what Ves imagined it looked like behind his visor.

Both sides continued their wordless standoff to the point that everyone stopped their idle conversation.

A grizzled female corps commander nodded first, prompting Melkor to nod in return. Everyone turned their heads and resumed their friendly chats.

"What was that all about?" Ves whispered furiously.

"We mech pilots have ways to measure each other's strengths. I acquitted myself well." Melkor responded with pride. "I'm not a Larkinson for nothing."

As an elite who grew up in a military dynasty, Melkor stood head and shoulders above the rabble who only received standard training. Despite his relative youth, his deep foundation allowed him to match many older mercenaries in a duel.

Ves suspected he'd be seeing lots of situations like this aboard the Ark Horizon. Even aboard a capital ship, the mech pilots still reigned supreme.

Chapter 167 Lord Kaine

After the shuttle picked up a full load, it flew back to the Ark Horizon. As the shuttle neared the immense fleet carrier, Ves got a new appreciation of her incredible construction. Although her armor looked fairly scuffed and worn out, it didn't detract from the majesty of a two-kilometer capital ship.

The CFA and MTA maintained a monopoly on warships. No other ships under any human power were allowed to carry fixed weapons. Supposedly, the main reason why they forbid arming ships was because they'd be capable of an incredible amount of destruction otherwise.

This had indeed limited the massive amounts of death and destruction prevalent in internal conflicts. It also left the human polities scratching their heads on how to enforce their power in space.

Eventually, they switched over to the combat carrier doctrine. Staring off from a basic mech carrier design, they enhanced its structure and massively piled up the armor. In place of fixed hardpoints, they added in armored enclosures akin to bunkers on the sides of the carrier design.

A rear entry allowed mechs to enter these bunkers from within the ship and fire out into space from its narrow gaps. Thus, they turned the carrier into an improvised warship.

Over time, the bunkers grew more sophisticated to the point where mech designers came up with specialized defensive mechs that excelled in the role. They gave up almost all pretenses of mobility in favor of enhancing their power, endurance and targeting systems.

Both the CFA and MTA turned a blind eye to the phenomenon. The limitations of the mech frame insured that they could never increase their firepower beyond the level of what a mech would be able to wield. It would be like a fly trying to shoot a human-sized pistol. It couldn't be done without cheating.

This imposed a limit on an armored carrier's capacity for destruction, which suited their purposes. As long as no one flung around nukes or planet-cracking mass drivers, everyone got along fine.

From an engineering perspective, Ves admired the Ark Horizon's ability to carry and field over a hundred mechs. The floating citadel housed an extremely complex ecosystem in order to keep the mechs and the people who serviced them running.

The shuttle passed through a translucent energy screen and entered one of the smaller hangar bays meant for shuttle traffic. Once it landed at its designated spot, the hatch slid open, allowing the passengers entry to the carrier's busy deck.

"This way, please." A uniformed attendant greeted the guests and led them to the exit of the hanger.

Ves looked around and noted that all of the shuttles in the hangar bay looked brand new. This contrasted sharply with the slightly worn and used look of the rest of the carrier.

Once they entered the corridors and navigated through several decks, everyone could sense the age of the Ark Horizon. Lord Kaine hadn't spent too much time and effort in refurbishing its utilitarian interior.

He wondered why Lord Kaine went to the trouble of procuring such an expensive ship in the first place. The crew seemed attentive enough, but as Ves walked past several hangars and mech stables, he noted that at least half of the mechs were owned by mercenaries.

As his mind roiled with questions, they finally arrived at a large and expansive dining hall. Its wood-paneled interior along with the colorful banners draped over the walls gave the room a classy look.

Floating little suns of light provided moody lighting. The balls of light whirled around lazily above everyone's heads as if swept by a tide.

Various large circular tables awaited the guests. It became evident that the dining arrangements had been split in two. The first tier had been reserved for the mech pilots while those who took up other professions seated themselves at the lower tier of tables.

A strange situation emerged where Melkor had received an invitation to sit closer to the seat of power.

"Go ahead, Melkor." Ves urged his cousin. "Observe the other guests and try to figure out their origins and motivations. I have a bad feeling about this mission, so I need you to keep your eyes peeled."

Melkor nodded and patted Ves on the back. "I'll see you later then."

That left Ves with a grumpy-looking Lucky. A security officer had attached a series of shackles and harnesses on his cat that prevented him from employing his energy claws. Lucky looked like a prisoner with all of the extra hardware attached to his limbs. Since the harness limited his pet's mobility, he had to be carried around.

Once the pair found their seats, they waited for the other guests to take their places. Low conversation hung about in the air as everyone started to familiarize themselves with their fellow colleagues.

"Hello there." A middle-aged woman bearing the uniform of a ship captain greeted him from his left. "You look rather young to be invited to this banquet. Are your parents around?"

The question threw him off for a bit. Ves regarded the woman with a wary look. Her question sounded innocuous, but had the effect of undermining his qualifications.

Ves didn't wish to give away too much information, so he only replied with a single sentence. "I am a mech designer."

The captain raised an eyebrow. "Are you now? That explains your presence. My, oh my, Lord Kaine finally managed to reel in a mech designer, and so young as well! You must be a great talent if the lord decided to settle on you. This expedition has been delayed for several months due to Lord Kaine's insistence on bringing on a competent mech designer."

That sounded worrisome. Ves might have to play a critical role to the success of the expedition. He wasn't sure he'd be up to the task. He expected to take part in a more modest expedition.

Even as doubt started to swirl in his mind, their host finally made an appearance. An elderly man with neatly trimmed grey hair glided from the air like a god descending amongst mortals. Even the soft bulbs of light stopped illuminating the room in order to shine a spotlight onto his purple robed form. Various emblems marked his many folds of clothes, one of which Ves recognized as a noble crest.

No one spoke a word as Lord Kaine traversed above everyone's head. Once he neared the ground, he smoothly turned around and seated himself at a

throne-like seat at the head of the foremost table. Kaine lifted a wrinkly hand, which caused the lights to turn back to normal.

The man glanced slowly around the room and nodded in satisfaction.

"Everyone is here. Good. I have waited so long for this expedition to come together. Now, the final pieces of the puzzle have fallen into place. This banquet represents the official start of our venture!"

Some of the guests sighed in relief. Evidently, they had been looking forward for the delays to be over. Ves went over these people and saw that most of them wore the same blue uniform as the regular crewmen aboard the Ark Horizon.

"Many of you may know me as Lord Jeremiah Kaine, the former patriarch of House Kaine. I fought in the trench lines as a mech pilot in my younger years and took up leadership of my noble House in my later years. Under my inspired leadership, I elevated my House from a purely commercial family concern into ruling over star systems in the name of the Constance Grand Kingdom."

Over half of the the guests showed clueless expressions. Constance Kingdom?

"The Constance Grand Kingdom is an established second-rate state in the Grey Willow Star Sector, which is a couple of sectors away. The Ark Horizon has come a long way in order to reach the Komodo Star Sector. Even after we have arrived, we have faced several setbacks, from equipment failure to the abrupt departure of our resident mech designer."

Lord Kaine growled those last words that made it clear that he took it as a personal betrayal. Ves raised his guard. As the mech designer who took up his ignomous predecessor's role, he'd likely be subjected to additional scrutiny.

Several minutes went by as the elder noble meandered into a tale about the Ark Horizon. It had a storied history half a decade ago. It acquitted itself well in a war that no one present cared about. House Kaine snapped up the ship in a secretive deal that their host quickly glossed over.

More importantly, Lord Kaine detailed the number of people that would be part of the expedition. The core crew of the Ark Horizon consisted of around nine-hundred spacers, mech pilots and mech technicians. They were all directly employed by House Kaine and enjoyed the highest amount of trust in the expedition.

Secondly, Lord Kaine introduced the three trusted mercenary corps he brought with him from the Grey Willow Star Sector. They were also in charge of the Ark Horizon's perimeter security and were also tasked with watching over all the other mercenaries. They also took charge of the Ark Horizon's perimeter security with seven different ships of varying sizes.

"Of course, there's also you, the local help." Lord Kaine said and turned to the rowdier and less professional looking mercs at the table. "While we have little in common, we share at least some common goals, the most important of which is to earn a fortune and retire with our lives intact."

One merc who blatantly sipped a smuggled flask rose from his seat. "Hear, hear!"

Kaine glared at the offending merc. Evidently, the former patriarch did not appreciate the interruption.

"I am aware that the Komodo Star Sector is one of humanity's youngest settled regions. I can make some allowances for frontier culture, but I appreciate it if you let me finish."

"Uh, sorry boss."

With that incident done with, Lord Kaine resumed his speech. "Everyone of you will play the leading role in our upcoming expedition. I have spent many days pouring over every available mercenary corps. Only those who are present here today have made the cut."

All of the local mercs puffed themselves up like peacocks showing off their feathers. Lord Kaine had offered extremely generous conditions to every mercenary corps. They stood to gain a massive amount of wealth if the expedition panned out.

"Those with keener eyes will recognize that most of your fighters specialize in close quarters mech combat. There is a good reason for that which will become clear in the coming weeks. Make no mistake. You will have to earn your paycheck."

Lord Kaine spoke on for ten more minutes, but Ves hardly learned anything of true import. The elderly man kept bragging about what he experienced in his two-hundred year long life. He proudly shared some anecdotes on his most famous war exploits.

All of the mech pilots lapped it up. They eagerly hung on to their employer's every word. The non-mech pilots like Ves paid a lot less importance to his stories. Most of them impatiently clamored for a meal.

Ves already suspected something like this might happen. Despite his age and many accomplishments, Lord Kaine exhibited the typical behavior of a self-centered potentate. His formative years as a successful mech pilot had made a mark on the rest of his life.

The main characters would always be the mech pilots. The norms didn't matter as much. They only existed to serve the privileged class who always played the main role in every conflict. The older and more solidified society in the Grey Willow Star Sector probably had it worse in this aspect.

"The old fart has a tendency to blabber for hours." The female ship captain whispered to Ves. "Personally, I think his doctors botched up his life-prolonging treatment. Sometimes, he acts way too senile. You'd expect that kind of behavior from five-hundred year olds, not two-hundred year olds."

They both sounded fairly old to Ves, who until recently never dared to hope he would get to live just as long. A modern day human with sufficient access to medical services could expect to live around 150 years.

His seat neighbor's words prompted him to regard Lord Kaine with a critical eye. Ves had to admit that the man appeared to be in much worse shape than you'd expect. Perhaps some old war wounds interfered with his life-prolonging treatment. Such a thing happened more than once.

All of this meant that Ves might have his hands full very soon. The prospect of working for an unreasonable boss did not fill his life with joy.

Those four-hundred merits better be worth it, he silently thought. He already started to see the basic setup for their expedition, and it appeared that the local mercenaries would have to take on most of the burden while Lord Kaine and his trusted men made sure no one ran off.

Chapter 168 A Tale

Lord Kaine suddenly halted in his retelling of a story of how he bested three knights in a melee duel. "Ah, enough about my modest achievements. Let me introduce to you the true purpose of my expedition."

The flying bulbs of lights started to merge into a vivid projection of a large and stormy terrestrial planet.

"This is Groening IV, our ultimate destination. It is the fourth planet of a fairly significant star system out here in the frontier. Before you try, don't try to extrapolate its coordinates. My subordinates have carefully wiped all traces that can be used to determine its exact location."

While Ves knew little about planets, Groening IV looked incredibly active. Dark storms raged about the gleaming surface of the planet. It looked highly metallic in appearance and the temperature must be fluctuating wildly as well.

"A single survey ship stumbled upon the mineral-rich planet. She surveyed the planet for several days and found out that it held a vibrant underground world filled with life. Unfortunately, most of the time it is impossible for any ship pass through the relentless storms. The metallic shards in the hurricane can wear down most vessels before they get through."

Even a corvette or a frigate might get chewed up by this ever-present metal storm. Ves wouldn't wish to plunge his valuable Barracuda through this raging force of nature.

"Thus, the survey ship left the system. The captain of the ship kept the location and details of this peculiar system to himself. Months later, after he returned to civilization, he processing the data recorded by his ship and found that the storm is constantly strengthening and weakening in a cyclical fashion."

The projection of Groening IV calmed down. Many storms started to abate while some portions even saw clear sky for the first time in decades.

"Once every twenty-seven years, the storm enters its leeward period. For roughly forty standard days, any ship will be able to land onto its surface and seek an entrance to the planet's promised underground domain. The captain of the survey ship knew he might have some gold in his hands, so he sold it to an experienced group of treasure hunters."

Lord Kaine carefully left out the details of the people involved. He didn't want anyone to track down their identities and sniff out the coordinates of the Groening System behind his back.

"After obtaining this priceless knowledge, they waited for the right time and sent an expedition to explore the underground world. What they found changed their fortune."

A couple of recordings played out in the central projection. Everyone paid attention to the vast metallic flora. It looked like a jungle dyed in silver, green and blue. The indigenous life forms on this planet had developed in a way that made use of the abundant minerals in the extremely hardy soil.

No natural light from the local sun reached this underground bounty, but several strange luminescent minerals lit up various portions of the vast region. They shone with a vast amount of power.

"The light that illuminates the caverns are radioactive, but that is not enough to provide sufficient light. Once the expedition took some samples, they discovered that the glowing minerals are laced with low-value exotics."

Everyone shook at those words. A planet that contained traces of low-value exotics might possess deposit of higher value exotics as well.

"Further surveys has found that the various plants have extracted trace amounts of exotics from the soil. Unfortunately, the concentration is too low to really matter. While they surveyed the terrain in search of a substantial deposit of exotics, they encountered their first native beasts."

Recordings of six-limbed hexapods played out in the projections. At first, the animals seemed wary and alarmed at the new human arrivals. Most of the animals possessed a rigid metallic exoskeleton and their sizes ranged from dogs to elephants.

Once the expedition tried to kill a smaller hexapod, they encountered their first casualties. The dog-sized hexapod withstood a substantial amount of laser beams. Its metal shell absorbed and dispersed the heat with far more

efficiency than what was possible. In the end, a mech had to intervene and stepped over the creature, finally squashing it flat.

"The sudden aggression changed the disposition of the native beasts in the area. They suddenly whipped up in a frenzy, causing scores of animals to storm the group. Many people on foot perished due to their inability to threaten the hexapods."

Over half of the guards died without damaging a single hexapod. Their laser rifles did no damage at all. In some cases, the animals even enjoyed the free bursts of thermal energy.

Even the mechs got beaten up by the larger animals. It took a lot of physical wrestling and stomping to put down these incredibly tough beasts.

"I will spare you the details of the aftermath. Suffice to say, once the expedition performed autopsies on the beasts, they found to their surprise that they all possess a strange and wondrous organ laced with an exceptionally valuable mix of exotics. This organ is the means in which these hexapods are able to thrive. It absorbs heat from the environment and provides them with energy to move their heavy limbs."

A chart appeared that outlined what kind of exotics these heat organs incorporated. The name at the top provoked a substantial response from the crowd. Even Ves sat up straight when he glimpsed the name.

"Many of the exotics found in the heat organs possess special properties, but are not too valuable in these low concentrations. The only exception here is monoexurite."

Most people who attended the banquet knew the value of monoexurite. A mere pinch of monoexurite would instantly devolve this entire gathering into a slaughterhouse. According to the current market price, one gram of monoexurite was worth around two billion bright credits.

"I am certain that everyone is familiar with monoexurite. Fifty milligrams of monoexurite is enough to enhance the range of an FTL drive by fifty percent. Smaller amounts of monoexurite is also used in the fabrication of top-quality mech components."

All of the mech pilots present already dreamed about hunting down these beasts. In their eyes, they were nothing but walking bags of credits.

Even Ves had to hold back his insatiable greed. One reason why the Barracuda cost so many coalition credits was because its powerful FTL drive incorporated a substantial amount of monoexurite. He experienced the power of monoexurite first-hand whenever he travelled with his corvette.

"The hexapods seem to accumulate monoexurite from their diets. They accumulate the exotics over time. The expedition conjectured that the amount of monoexurite determines their size. Only when they reach the size of an elephant will it be worthwhile to harvest their heat organs."

Once the expedition learned from their previous encounter, they switched their gears. They drew back everyone on foot and sent out squads of mechs armed with melee weapons and ballistic cannons. They tracked down every major hexapod in the region and harvested over twenty heat organs in three weeks.

According to the chart, every heat organ contained around two-hundred milligrams of monoexurite. The expedition already paid for itself many times over. While they hadn't found any major deposits of monoexurite, the several grams of monoexurite they harvested so far would set them up for life.

Lord Kaine shook his head. "Unfortunately, the expedition lost its discipline. Every squad of mechs focused on hunting the hexapods above all else. They lost themselves to their greed and forgot that they are operating on alien soil."

The projections changed into short incidental recordings of mechs getting ambushed by dinosaur-sized hexapods. These animals might not be much

bigger than the elephant-sized ones, but their gleaming metallic scales withstood a large number of cannon shells without problem and could even deflect many sword strikes.

A massacre ensued as the kings of the metallic forest systematically hunted down the mechs. Many scientists and guards quickly packed up their gear and escaped to their shuttles. As they ascended into the air, a small tide of winged hexapods the size of bats emerged from the forest.

The entire swarm started to pelt the shuttles. They dented the shuttle's thin armor and started to wreak havoc on its systems. Many of the shuttles never made it out.

"In the end, the expedition lost over ninety percent of its ground personnel. Furthermore, they lost all of their valuable mechs as well as the monoexurite they harvested so far. The motherships orbiting Groening IV dispatched several shuttles in order to retrieve the harvested monoexurite, but found to their dismay that the hexapods have already taken it away."

Perhaps a single lucky hexapod gulped the entire fortune. Ves couldn't even imagine how big that hexapod might grow to once it digested all of that monoexurite.

Lord Kaine came to the conclusion of his retelling. "The loss of all of their ground assets bankrupted the expedition and forced them to sell all their remaining assets. An agent of my House happened to win the logs of their ill-fated journey to the Groening System at a private auction. Now we are here, twenty-seven years later."

Everyone knew what kind of opportunity this expedition represented. As for Ves, he finally knew why Lord Kaine asked for a mech designer. The exact details still eluded him, but he probably figured he'd be tasked with optimizing

everyone's mechs to be able to withstand a battle against these peak-level hexapods.

Ves already started to gulp. The awesome power of these beast kings scared him witless. They were as strong as heavy knights but moved as fast as light mechs. Their incredible strength couldn't be overcome by any single mech.

"I will meet with everyone of you one by one after dinner. In order to safeguard the coordinates of the Groening System during this expedition, we must take several precautions. Every ship that intends to take part will have to accept restrictions to their quantum entanglement nodes and FTL drives.

Furthermore, you will also have to accept a liaison who will be in charge of coordinating with my fleet."

A lot of the ship captains looked outraged, but they had no other choice but to accept. Such an arrangement happened all the time. While it left the mercenaries vulnerable should the liaison choose to sabotage their ships, in practice they only resorted to such drastic means when threatened.

Everyone present had already signed a couple of non-disclosure agreements and restrictive contracts enforced by the CFA. Anyone who willfully defied would be regarded as *persona non grata* in civilized space.

That might not stop some of the mercenaries present, hence Lord Kaine partnered up with three professional mercenary corps from his native Grey Willow Star Sector. Together, they possessed the largest ships and the strongest mechs.

Ves didn't know why the local mercenaries went along with these arrangements. The man blatantly intended to treat them like cannon fodder. Perhaps their greed took over their common sense.

Once their meals flew to the tables, everyone started to dig in. While Ves leisurely sipped his soup, the female captain by his side started to chatter with him for some reason.

"Hey, I never got your name. Can you tell me who you are? I'm Captain Rose Wilson, by the way. I run a cozy converted transport. My husband leads our mech contingent."

The woman didn't recognize his name nor any of his recent mech designs. "I'm also an apprentice to Master Olson."

That startled her a bit. "That posh little doll from the Friday Coalition? I've seen her once or twice. Her outfits are worth more than my ship!"

"A Master Mech Designer is a strategic resource to any state." Ves briefly explained. "If she wanted to, she can earn as much as a planet makes in a year by developing a single design."

"Why are you here then?" She frowned.

"Good question. To experience new horizons, I suppose." And hopefully remain alive, but Ves didn't mention that. "My master is able to reach the heights she enjoys today because she worked really hard throughout her entire career. I'm merely following in her footsteps."

"That applies to everything. I didn't get where I am today by taking it easy. She's a sensible girl, alright." Rose chuckled as if she didn't acknowledge that Master Olson was likely twice her age. "Lord Kaine must be expecting a lot from a genius like you. That, or he must be scraping the bottom of the barrel."

Regardless of what his client intended for Ves, he'd meet the man himself after dinner.

Chapter 169 Summons

Ves enjoyed the varied dishes with relish. The dishes had been enhanced by a lot of unique spices that only a well-developed state like the Constance

Grand Kingdom could come up with. It caused a lot of the locals some consternation when their mouths exploded in an unexpected burst of freshness or heat.

The only thing he didn't enjoy was Captain Wilson's constant chatter. While she disparaged him a lot, she also mentioned useful information whenever she talked about the mercenaries. She certainly loved gossiping.

"You need to eat more meat! You're too flimsy to impress the girls. A good boy like can use some time in the gym."

"The three mercenary outfits who partnered up with our boss are all professionals. They fill up half the Ark Horizon's hangar and they brought even more mechs aboard their own transports. They've got so much firepower that even Lord Kaine can't order them around."

"Frankly, the Grey Willow mechs outnumber the locals, but they aren't geared towards fighting the hexapods. I'm seeing a lot of ballistic cannons and even a couple of railguns, so they're likely there to fend off any sandmen incursion."

That drew his attention. "Do you think we'll get hit by the sandmen?"

"They'd be blind not to. The Ark Horizon is so big and fat that her FTL transition will radiate for many light-years away. The sandmen will definitely respond."

Ves had only heard about the sandmen but already developed a lot of apprehension about them. They sounded and behaved in a simple fashion most of the time, but whenever their higher leaders got involved, they made perplexing decisions. Lord Kaine might be biting off more than he could chew.

"Will your ship be participating in the fight directly?"

"Heavens, no. Our mechs are solely kitted out for melee combat. My husband and his men will go groundside and hunt some game. My ship is a sitting duck without mechs so I'm probably expected to keep her close to the Ark."

The courses kept on coming so they both went back to eating. Ves turned around for a moment and looked at Melkor.

His cousin drew some attention due to his youth and his insistence on wearing a visor, but he acquitted himself decently among the mercenaries. They lived in two different worlds, so Melkor had little in common with the men and women who clawed their way out of mediocrity through hard work and grit, but they respected his background as an elite brought up by a military family if nothing else.

Captain Wilson followed his gaze and whistled. "I saw you come in with that fellow. My oh my, he's got a lovely physique for a man so young. So limber and compact. He must have some really dense muscles."

"He's my cousin."

"Your family is truly blessed to have a clever designer and a dashing pilot in their midst. Where are you two from?"

"We're both citizens of the Bright Republic."

"That's not too far away from here. I heard about your little Republic."

"Hopefully you heard some good things."

"Not really. Everyone who mentioned your state expects it to be thrashed by the Vesians, who have a lot of fighting spirit."

Ves had no way to retort. In truth, while their nobility often descended into infighting, their working class citizens always fought with passion. They hoped to distinguish themselves on the battlefield in order to be granted knighthood, which was the first step on the road to nobility.

Compared to the highly motivated Vesians, the Brighters treated the generations-long conflict as a defensive war. Any planet that fell in their hands often didn't resist too hard. As far as the average citizen was concerned, they merely switched landlords.

The only reason why the Bright Republic lasted so long was because it invested a lot in a professional military.

"I believe in my state. We've fended off the Vesians many times. This time will be no different."

Wilson shrugged. "If that's what makes you happy. By the way, speaking of Vesians, you should watch out for Keller's Blades."

She gestured to a mercenary commander sitting quietly at the end of the principal table. The man must be Keller himself. The Vesian had a dark complexion and possessed a tall, robust body. Only a couple of other mercenaries could match his sheer bulk and strength.

"What do you know about Keller's Blades?"

"Oh, nothing much besides the usual. They've been operating out of Mancroft for a few years. I heard he pissed off some petty noble and got chased away from his home. He's been eking out a decent living among the stars protecting prospectors and researchers looking to cross the borders."

"That doesn't sound so scary."

Wilson shook her head. "Don't underestimate the Blades. The scary thing about their group is that they are always sporting better gear despite fulfilling low-paying missions. Who knows where they get their money?"

That sounded a lot more suspicious. Either Commander Keller had a backer or he earned a lot of additional income through less respectable means.

Even a gossip like Captain Wilson didn't know much more, so they both turned back to their meals. After a sumptuous dinner, their host returned to his stateroom and left his guests with wine and orders to wait until they received a summons.

Everyone waited patiently as Lord Kaine called up the guests by pair. Captain Wilson noted that he called up the most prestigious mercenaries first, and worked down the list according to their reputation.

Commander Keller and his ship captain received their summons midway, so he must be sporting a decent amount of mechs.

Captain Wilson received a summons near the end when the dining hall had mostly emptied out. Ves nodded to her politely. Even if she never shut her mouth, she mentioned a lot of useful things. Ves now had a better picture on the mercenaries who signed up for this expedition.

If she didn't warn him, he might never know that Keller's Blades came from Vesia.

After all of the local mercenaries left, the non-combatants started to get called up. Before Ves had his turn, a couple of scientists went ahead. Ves learned that they were exobiologists of some renown. They'd likely be put in charge of dissecting the hexapods and determining their weaknesses.

Fifteen minutes after the scientists left, an attendant entered the largely empty hall and finally called up Ves. "Mr. Larkinson, Lord Kaine would like to see you now."

He nodded and rose from his seat. Melkor also pushed off the wall he was leaning against and picked up Lucky. Ves thought it might be rude if he held his pet while speaking to the former patriarch.

The attendant led them through a couple of corridors before they reached a secured hatch. A couple of security officers scanned their bodies and they both came up clean, though Lucky couldn't say the same.

"Please hand over your comms and leave your pet outside. He'll be safe while you meet with Lord Kaine."

Ves knew he couldn't refuse the request. They took their employer's security very seriously. He very reluctantly detached his wrist comm and placed it on a tray. He trusted the upgraded comm's security so the security officers shouldn't be able to access the Mech Designer System. Still, he felt awfully naked without its presence.

Melkor put up less of a fuss. He acted like he didn't have anything to hide on his comm and simply threw it on the tray in a small but impressive feat of accuracy. As for Lucky, he got to sit on the deck in a grumpy mood.

"You're cleared to enter."

Lord Kaine occupied a stateroom meant for admirals. The entire room took up as much space as a house, and represented an extravagant use of space on a spaceship that normally made full use of every cubic meter. Like the dining room, Kaine changed the interior into one befitting a classic mansion.

A lot of trophies and mementos took up the available space. Banners of fallen mercenary corps hung on the walls while broken pieces of mechs encased in glass hovered before them in a monument to worthy opponents.

Ves and Melkor slowly traversed the room and sat down on the high-backed chairs facing the elevated desk. The wooden furniture granted the one who sat behind the desk a lot of gravitas. Though Kaine hadn't aged very gracefully, his impeccable purple dress and immaculate grooming enhanced his dignity.

"Mister Larkinson. You brought a companion."

"He's my cousin acting as my guard."

Despite his senile appearance, Kaine possessed a strong gaze. He bore down on Melkor with the force of a former warrior and commander, but Melkor didn't flinch.

"You have an impressive cousin. What's your name?"

"Melkor Larkinson."

"I will take note of you."

Once Kaine finished acknowledging Melkor, he turned back to Ves. "Let us get on to business, shall we? You see, you are not the first mech designer to sign on to my expedition. House Kaine obtained logs of the previous expedition to the Groening System and so we are well aware of what we will find on the ground."

Ves could imagine how much time and money they spent on preparing for the expedition. The Ark Horizon alone must have drained a lot of their resources.

"We courted a number of promising mech designers, and finally managed to attract a singular talent with connections to one of the planets ruled by our House."

The former patriarch declined to mention the mech designer's name. "The mech designer happily made use of my House, borrowing a large amount of funds and skilled personnel to build up his own homegrown enterprise. Up until the expedition commenced, I assumed we had an understanding."

"Then he disappeared! He abandoned us!" Lord Kaine suddenly shouted and slammed his fist against his desk. "He dissolved most of his assets and disappeared just as the expedition almost reached the Komodo Sector!"

Both of the Larkinsons had to endure their employer's tirade for several minutes. Ves tried to stay impassive, but the betrayal affected Lord Kaine on a

very deep level. What was worse, he trusted the mech designer a lot, to the point where he granted the fellow access to a lot of the logs of the previous expedition.

This meant that the previous mech designer might be able to figure out the Groening's System's coordinates. Even Ves didn't have to think very far on what a disaster that might be.

Eventually, Lord Kaine ran out of steam. "Enough about the past. Let's go over your responsibilities."

He summoned up a small projection of a familiar recording. It showed several mechs getting torn apart by one of the hexapod kings.

"We are bound to encounter these highly developed beasts. They will need to be tackled. Due to the difficult atmospheric conditions even when the storm is at its most placid state, we are limited in the amount of hardware we are able to deploy."

The projection changed into a complicated chart.

"Our analysts also strongly believe that overly strong power fluctuations will attract a tsunami of beasts, so we will not be able to deploy anything heavier than a handful of heavy mechs."

Lord Kaine finally went on to how he planned to tackle the kings. "None of the mercenaries are willing to confront these apex predators. Not even my partners from the Grey Willow Star Sector have the courage to hunt these majestic beasts down. So be it. Our House has nurtured a number of elite mech pilots and matched them with mechs that can bring out their full potential."

He waved his hand, causing the projection to change to a dozen men and women training together. Their ages varied, but most of them looked to be around thirty to forty years old.

Ves paid more attention to their mechs. The platoon consisted of two heavy knights, six medium melee-oriented mechs and four medium mechs armed with cannon-sized railguns.

All of the melee mechs eschewed swords in favor of blunt weapons such as staffs and maces. The weapons had a lot of heft to them, allowing them to strike with great momentum even if it took a while for them to land their blows.

"These are very impressive mechs." Ves remarked, impressed by the performance exhibited by the mechs as they performed several live fire exercises. "I don't recognize the models, but they all look like advanced currentgen mechs. They are already in a very high state of optimization. Still, I'm not sure if they can withstand the largest hexapods."

Even mechs had limits, more so now Ves had some insight into battle mechatronics. The mechs shown in the projection exhibited larger than usual strength, but the hexapods showed off much greater strengths in the old recordings. Even a prepared group of mechs might not survive an encounter.

"It is your job to make sure they make it out alive." Lord Kaine decisively declared. "If even one of the pilot dies, I will make sure you will regret you were born!"

The sudden aggression pushed Ves back against his seat. The command was too outrageous! Why did Lord Kaine prioritize the lives of his mech pilots all of a sudden? Ves turned back to the projection and tried to find some clues.

Ves found what he was looking for when the mech pilots dove into their simulator pods. Their bodies appeared in a virtual space with their names hovering above their heads.

One of them bore the name of Felicity Kaine.

"My great-granddaughter leads the hunting platoon. This is to be her first hunt."

Oh.

Chapter 170 Hunting Platoon

Afterwards, Lord Kaine discussed the finer details. He wanted to keep Ves close in order to avoid another desertion.

Ves didn't object to Kaine's strongly worded suggestion, but he wanted Melkor to stay with him. He already found his cousin's presence to be a boon. Even if the other mech pilots didn't respect him, they acknowledged Melkor's strength.

"The Ark has a berth available for your cousin's mech." The leader of the expedition answered after a few seconds of thoughts. "I'll allow him to accompany you, but you'll have to leave behind your weapons."

"Very well."

They hashed out an elaborate set of responsibilities and conditions. Ves would transfer to the Ark Horizon and work full-time on improving the hunting platoon's mechs. The fleet carrier came with a compact but modern mech fabrication workshop, outfitted by his predecessor.

Treachery aside, the man spent his ample budget well. The 3D printer in particular almost matched the Dortmund in speed and precision. For now, the mech technicians used the printer in order to fabricate new replacement parts, but hopefully Ves would make much better use of the machines.

Along with access to the workshop, Ves also had the right to draw on the carrier's well-stocked raw material reserves. In order to make sure he didn't squander his reserves, Lord Kaine assigned a minder who kept watch over his activities.

"I'm okay with that." Ves replied. He knew that Lord Kaine didn't trust him very much. He'd keep a close watch on Ves anyway, so they might as well get it out of the way.

They also discussed the deployment of the Barracuda. As a fast and fairly modern corvette, she would function as an ideal scout. Lord Kaine wanted to bolster her crew with his own men but Ves put his foot down on that point.

"I don't want too many foreigners on my ship. She's extremely valuable."

Ves suggested that Lord Kaine post a single liaison on the Barracuda. He acceded to the demands to restrict the FTL drive and the quantum entanglement node with special hardware as long as they didn't permanently disable the modules.

"Very well. We shall have to leave it at that." Lord Kaine finally conceded. The Barracuda wouldn't be straying too far from the main fleet as a consequence.

After coming to an understanding on his role, Ves bid Lord Kaine farewell and left the stateroom. As they came out of the reinforced hatch, they returned their comms to their wrists and picked up Lucky.

A young uniformed attendant greeted the pair as they wondered where to go. "Mr. Larkinson? I'm Ensign Jules D'Amato, and I've been assigned to be your guide."

Ves expected some kind of grizzled old veteran who took no bullshit from anyone. Instead, he got a polite and friendly minder who behaved suspiciously friendly.

"Can you take us to our quarters? We brought some luggage but we left it behind in the hangar bay."

"Your luggage is already brought to your new quarters. This way, please."

They traversed the corridors and went down to the bottom decks. Overall, most of the ship's operations happened in the upper decks. The activities pertaining to mechs occurred at the lower decks.

The Larkinsons started to see more crew members donning various different uniforms. Ensign D'Amato explained who they were. "Half of the Ark Horizon's complement of mechs are owned by mercenaries."

"Why isn't Lord Kaine filling up the hangar bays with his own mechs?"

Ensign D'Amato adopted a pensive look. "House Kaine is currently burdened by many obligations. Lord Kaine is unwilling to draw away too many mechs on a lengthy voyage to the galactic rim."

His words sounded reasonable, but came off as an excuse. If Ves was in charge of the expedition, he wouldn't have been nearly so liberal in hiring so many mercenaries.

After ten more minutes of navigating deeper into the ship, they finally reached the lower officer quarters. The Ensign led them to a modestly furnished quarters with barely enough room for two.

"This will be your quarters. Your comm is already keyed into the lock, but I don't recommend you store any valuables or sensitive data inside. Please get rested. I will pick you up tomorrow morning for breakfast before introducing you to Lady Felicity."

Once D'Amato left the quarters, the hatch slid shut, giving the Larkinsons the illusion of privacy. Ves sighed and sat down on the lower bunk while Melkor checked his luggage to see if it was still intact.

"They went through our luggage." He stated.

"That's to be expected. House Kaine has grown quite paranoid."

Ves expected a difficult assignment due to his predecessor's untimely withdrawal. That might become a larger hindrance in his task to make sure the hunting platoon made it out alive and intact.

"What are your thoughts about the mission?"

"Lord Kaine is light on the details." Melkor leaned against the bulkhead once he went through his luggage. "One of the major uncertainties so far is his plan to deal with the sandmen. It's clear that the Groening System falls in their sphere of influence."

"Anything else? What are your impressions on the mercenaries?"

"The local mercenaries are fairly competent, but they're lacking in discipline. Half of them are quick to anger while the other half are quietly scheming their own plans. I'm not impressed. On the other hand, the three mercenary corps from the Grey Willow Star Sector behave a bit more competent than you might expect of soldiers for hire."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"George's Cavalry behave like they're still part of the military. Adila's Chosen is bound by a common religion. As for the Stray Phantoms, they try their best to appear normal, but my senses tell me that they're spooks."

This sounded a lot more complex than he initially thought. Ves scrunched his face in thought. "Could it be that different factions of the Constance Grand Kingdom have a stake in this expedition?"

"I'd put my money on that bet. House Kaine had probably made too many movements. Once the Constance Grand Kingdom found out about his intentions, they probably imposed their own conditions."

The truth might be different, but from what Ves had gathered it appeared to be true. The foreign mercenaries treated the ship as their own and took no notice of the officers from House Kaine.

The situation grew more complex by the minute. He already had to contend with traitors and leakers. "Their true identities doesn't matter. My only concern should be to work on the mechs of the hunting platoon."

They had nothing else to share. When Ves asked if Melkor had an impression of Keller, his cousin responded that he wasn't even aware that Keller came from the Vesia Kingdom.

"Well, we won't be interacting much with each other. Keller and his men will likely be sent down to the ground. Let's go to sleep."

They tucked in their beds early after taking a short shower. Lucky painstakingly climbed next to Ves as the light dimmed in the quarters.

"Careful, Lucky. I don't want your butt pressing on my face!" He hissed.

The next morning, they both woke up fairly early. Ves scratched his face and sent a resentful glare at his cat. Lucky must have poured out his frustration at his lack of mobility. Melkor had to carry him around like a baby.

"Good morning, Mr. Larkinson. The officer's mess has already opened its doors. This way, please."

Ensign D'Amato brought them to the officer's mess where they all enjoyed a light breakfast. Ves still felt a bit full from last night's banquet so he limited his breakfast to toast and coffee.

After filling up their stomachs, their guide brought them to a hangar bay filled with mechs bearing the livery of House Kaine. Now that Ves had a closer look, he noticed that the quality of the mechs fell short on what a second-rate state should normally field. While they all appeared to be currentgen mechs, they already bore the marks of age.

The quality of mechs only went up once they entered the section that housed the hunting platoon. While Ves had already seen the models in a projection, seeing them up close gave him a much stronger impression on their capabilities.

A large amount of men and women stood in neatly composed rows. A familiar-looking woman with autumn brown hair stood before her subordinates with her arms crossed before her chest.

When Ves came closer, he didn't know how to greet the platoon. He merely signed on as an outside consultant, so it wouldn't be appropriate to respond with a salute.

He must have failed some test, because Felicity Kaine's expression soured. "Are you our new mech designer?"

"That's correct. I hope to have your cooperation in this matter, miss Kaine."

"That remains to be seen, and don't call me that! I'm the commanding officer of the hunting platoon. My House affiliation has nothing to do with my current position, so I expect you to address me as Captain Kaine or ma'am."

"Yes... ma'am."

Ves didn't know if she hated mech designers in general or if he simply pissed her off in some way. Captain Kaine didn't waste anymore time and promptly dismissed her crew before walking away.

An older, barrel-chested man stepped up from the dispersing crew. "Don't mind her attitude. The success of the expedition rests on her shoulders, so she's bearing a lot of responsibilities right now."

"I take it she took the betrayal of the previous mech designer hard."

"Don't you know it. Your first task is to check and audit the workshop and its stores. My men have already checked the records and found nothing out of place, but it will help if you lend a hand. You'll also be able to familiarize yourself with what you have to work with while you're double-checking our records."

The man led the way as he introduced himself as Lance Ramirez, but everyone simply called him Chief Ramirez. As the senior NCO in charge of maintaining the hunting platoon's mechs, Ramirez had taken up the duty of orienting Ves.

"My men and I are very familiar with the mechs of the hunting platoon. Hopefully you'll be working on four different models."

Chief Ramirez brought him up close to each of the mechs resting in their stables.

First up was the two heavy knights. "The Ajax Olympian are variants of a popular model back home. They're great at absorbing impacts with their shields, but they don't possess enough arm power to threaten a well-armored hexapod without building up momentum."

"Why choose a variant over the base model?"

"The regular Ajax is a standard heavy knight meant to soak up damage from a distance. The Ajax Olympian on the other hand is great against threats up close. It specializes in grappling and locking down any threats up close."

Ves looked dubious at the mech as he heard the claim. He could see that the knight worked well enough if he had to grapple a regular mech. He couldn't say the same if it tried to wrestle even the weakest hexapod kings.

"Next up is the Volmar. It's a weapon specialist platform that possesses a good balance of speed, armor and power. While the two heavy knights hold down the big ones, the five Volmars will attempt to crush their eyes and other vulnerable parts of their bodies. They should possess sufficient force to grind down the massive sixlegs."

"Are you certain about that? From the recordings I've seen so far, none of the mechs in the previous expedition have ever made them flinch."

"Those mech pilots were idiots. Half of the time, they panicked and lashed out blindly. They also piloted lastgen mechs that lack many innovations. This time, we know what's coming, so Lord Kaine picked the very best mechs for the job. The Volmars will crush the beasts, you can count on that."

He didn't expect Chief Ramirez to have so much faith in his own models. The hexapod kings were clearly not to be trifled with. Ves faintly thought that Chief Ramirez had grown too attached to the mechs under his charge.

As an outsider, Ves possessed a more sober perspective. He considered the Volmas to be a well-made armsmaster design. However, this wide compatibility came at a cost. He thought they needed a lot more power to finish off a hexapod king without dragging out the fight.

Lastly Ramirez showed off railgun mechs. "The Empyrean is a mainstream model dedicated solely to wielding railguns. Every aspect of the Empyrean is slanted towards powering and providing the best targeting to its railgun cannon. It's able to fire a slug every five seconds at full charge."

"How many shots can it fire?"

"With an extended backpack module, it's capable of providing ammunition and power for sixty shots. That's more than enough to soften up four of the big lugs before they close in or run away."

Of all the mechs shown so far, Ves put most of his hope on the Empyreans. Their sophisticated railguns packed a lot of punch, though their firing rate didn't particularly impress him. A hexapod king might close the distance in the time the Empyreans fired off a single volley.

"I notice that you've only shown me three models so far when I distinctly remember there's supposed to be four."

"Ah." Chief Ramirez scratched his head. "Captain Kaine pilots a customized mech. She gave out strict orders to not let you get anywhere near her baby."

Great. Ves knew he had to make an effort to break the ice with Captain Kaine. He hadn't ignored some of dirty looks. His predecessor certainly poisoned the well around here. No one trusted mech designers anymore. How could he prove to the hunting platoon that he didn't intend to scam them all?