

Chapter 221 Perpetuity

His grandfather didn't look surprised when Ves made his request. "Any good mech workshop needs a crew of human hands. It's good of you to realize that. Too many manufacturers are seduced by the total control they have over their bots that they don't realize that their perfect arrangement falls apart once it bumps into an obstacle."

"I already know about the whole automation debate, grandfather. I won't follow in the footsteps of the Terrans."

Pretty much everyone in the galaxy knew about the dangers of relying too much on bots. A few hundred years ago, the Greater Terran United Confederation once thought to replace all menial labor with bots, and reached a remarkable degree robotization in their society.

All of this went dandy and fine, until some groups of undisciplined dissidents hacked several widespread models of bots, causing widespread destruction and mayhem. Bots went rogue as they attack the humans they served or caused deliberate fires and explosions.

The unprepared Terrans found to their horror that they depended so much on bots for their everyday life that they could hardly muster a response to the rogue bots.

Even worse was when their battle bots became compromised as well. While they possessed much tighter cybersecurity, rampaging bots had forcefully invaded the headquarters of the companies who made them. The rebels made off with libraries filled with source code and other critical files, which they used to devastating effect.

The so-called Bot Rebellion as it became known had fractured the largely unified humans into disparate islands of calm, as some bulwarks managed to eliminate the bots early. By the time the Terrans managed to get a grip on

their own territory, the dream of uniting the human race under a single political entity had been shattered.

"I'll send you one of my chiefs. It will take a lot of persuasion to relocate from Rittersberg to Cloudy Curtain, so you better offer him some good conditions. I suggest you look somewhere closer to fill up the rest of your roster."

"Thank you for that, grandfather. I'll be sure to treat him well."

Ves realized that Benjamin must have made a great sacrifice by parting with one of his chiefs. The Larkinsons always cultivated their own crop of technicians in order to be assured of their loyalty and qualifications. As long as he had a trusted chief watching over his technicians, Ves didn't have to worry about their conduct.

They closed the call after his grandfather estimated that the chief should arrive in a month. Ves figured he'd wait on hiring more mech technicians until then, as he wanted his new chief to make his own selection from the local workforce.

Ves spent the next day preparing his workshop for the new additions. He moved over the existing machines so that it offered enough space for two distinct production lines.

The old production line consisted of his second-hand printer and his second-hand assembly system. While a little slow, the old line sufficed in fabricating unmechs like the Marc Antony Mark II.

The new production line took up a lot more space. The basic production process started with inputting raw materials in the Dortmund printer. Bots brought over the parts it spat out to his new assembly system which should rapidly construct a new frame.

Any parts that required compressed armor went through a few more steps. The Dortmund printer fabricated an embryo which would then be submerged in a special solution in the chemical treatment machine.

Once the formula did its job, the altered embryo would then be put in an alloy compressor which will subject the unfinished piece of alloy to enormous forces. After that, a proper piece of compressed armor should come out of it, which would then be taking to his new assembly system to be put on a mech frame.

Despite the additional steps, Ves envisioned that the new production line should be able to work much faster than the old one. At the start, it might take a couple of days to fabricate a comech. The second one should be finished a little faster, while the third one took even less time.

This went on and on until the learning curve finally flattened. By that time, Ves boldly predicted that the new production line should be able to finish a comech within a single day.

"The most time consuming portion are the chemical treatment and the alloy compression phases. While it's not possible to automate them completely, if I can hire or train a specialist to take charge of these machines, he will be able to optimize their processes."

Perhaps Ves obsessed a little too much on arranging his production lines, but establishing a good flow saved a lot of money and time. It was better to plan his arrangements beforehand than to do it while he had a ton of orders to fulfill.

The next day, a small fleet of transports arrived at his workshop. After his security checked over the goods, Ves finally received the new additions to his workshop.

In order to save time, Ves tasked Carlos with setting up the machines. "While they look sophisticated, they're mostly self-contained so they should work right out of the box. Just run some diagnostics and start a few test projects to make sure they work according to specs."

"Are you sure you want me setting up these expensive machines?" Carlos asked apprehensively. After all, while he didn't know their exact models, they all looked extremely expensive and far beyond what a typical mech boutique should own.

"It's still within the range of your capabilities. Just don't drop anything and you're good to go."

"If you say so, boss."

Ves predicted that Carlos should take a couple of days to insure the machines had been installed correctly. Even if the bots sped up the installation, his fabricator still needed some time to check all of their functions.

In the meantime, Ves decided to start on designing the three models he'd present at the Vintage Festival. Gavin and Marcella sent him different reports that gave him some insight into his target audience.

"They're not simple lastgen fanboys."

Many visitors of the Vintage Festival merely wished to relive the past, but the ones with money had more discerning tastes. They should be his actual target segment. After skimming through the reports, Ves got a sense of what kind of product should appeal to their desires.

"Lastgen mechs will soon be used and discarded en masse in the upcoming war. This is the eventual fate for most outdated mechs, but it's a sad outcome nonetheless."

Those in charge intended to send out the lastgen mechs to the forefront of the battle because they were expendable. While this was the most logical and efficient decision to make, it nonetheless rested on the assumption that lastgen mechs could no longer contribute to society.

This was profoundly disrespectful to the people who developed an affection for this generation.

It was akin to putting a rifle in the hands of their grandparents and shoving them onto the battlefield to die. Now that they've grown old and infirm, they served no other use. Rather than allow them to continue to take up valuable resources, it was better to let them go out with a bang.

Even Ves felt ambivalent about this cold but rational decision. The alternative would be breaking down the mechs and forge new machines out of them, but that required way too much effort.

"Every model only has a limited shelf life. The moment a mech designer finalized a design, its clock had already started ticking."

Mechs generally lasted around twenty years. The visitors of the Vintage Festival disliked the ephemeral nature of their generation.

Ves had thought a lot about their desires. He finally touched upon one of their deepest desires.

"What they truly want is an immortal mech."

Enduring, eternal, immutable. If Ves could design a mech that embodied these ideals, he'd have a bestseller on his hands. His design should intrinsically grow in value as it got older.

"That's going to be a challenge."

Since mechs generally possessed a limited life span, their value always decreased over time. Even if his customers never piloted his models and

intended to put them on display, Ves had to ensure its components never decayed in this state.

This should be easy to do, but entailed a lot of small modifications. Ves had to replace the more delicate components in his design for durable versions that demanded very little maintenance.

He started with the easiest and most familiar design, the Marc Antony Mark II. Ves recalled the images he used to form its X-Factor and reused them in their original conditions except for one small addition. He added an underlying tone of continuity and perpetuity to their flavors.

After composing the altered images, Ves went to work on modifying his design. He already knew which components needed replacing, so he hardly wasted any time. It took only two days to rip out all of the disposable components and replace them with hardier versions.

The work hardly required a lot of thought, but Ves spent some time on testing his altered design to make sure it retained its functionality. While the mech still possessed elements that degraded over time, it should be manageable if their owners performed sporadic maintenance.

"I can't go too far in this direction." Ves carefully reminded himself. "Mechs that focus so much on longevity tend to turn into empty shells that fall apart once they enter the battlefield."

Even if the customers at the Vintage Festival bought the mechs to serve as collectables, they should still be able to fulfill their primary function. Mechs that lost their fighting capability lacked the authenticity that the festival goers demanded.

"Let's call this the Eternal Edition."

The Mark II Eternal Edition cost a bit more to build as Ves replaced some of its cheaper materials with more expensive ones. Other than that, the mech

should still match the specs of the regular design. Only its X-Factor should be different. Ves couldn't wait to fabricate a show model to experience its aura.

He had to order a new batch of raw materials to fabricate the Eternal Edition. While his order would be sent on the next convoy shipment to Cloudy Curtain, Ves turned his attention to his second project, the original Caesar Augustus.

A complex mood settled into his body as he called up a projection of the original design. "Just a year ago, I merely dreamed of being able to work with this design directly."

Carlos already made good progress with setting up his new production line. Soon, the Living Mech Corporation would be able to fabricate comech designs like the Caesar Augustus at a decent scale.

It represented a step up for his company and added to its prestige.

That said, Ves didn't plan on doing any business with the regular design outside the Festival. The demand for every lastgen model had declined so it made little sense to add yet another soon-to-be-obsolete design to his product catalog.

Working with the Caesar Augustus required a bit more effort from Ves. From a technical standpoint, Ves already knew what to tweak or replace. He mainly placed his concerns on its X-Factor.

"How can I shape the X-Factor of a design that's not my own?"

Perhaps the original design never carried any meaningful X-Factor at all. Nevertheless, the design still carried a touch of Jason Kozlowski in his younger years.

Ves had to respect the intentions of the original designer while simultaneously putting his own spin on its classic design.

Fortunately, his familiarity with his design allowed him to come up with an suitable vision for his Eternal Edition. Since it served as the centerpiece of his display, it should carry forth the original model's aspirations to serve as a leader and a rallying cry on the battlefield.

Since he only planned to do some minor modifications, Ves thought it was inappropriate to use the Triple Division technique. The design belonged to Jason Kozlowski and Ves didn't wish to tarnish the touch he left behind.

Instead, he intended to amplify its core concepts of hope and authority while adding a touch of eternity to the mixture. With his mental strength, Ves expected to achieve a remarkable result once he finished the modified design.

"Let's get to work."

Chapter 222 Eternal Edition

Ves successfully blended his new vision onto a very slightly tweaked design. With this, the Caesar Augustus Eternal Edition should be ready for fabrication once he got the raw materials.

This time, Ves had to wince as he ordered another batch of materials to add to his existing orders. Compressed armor always used up more exotics. With the rising cost of resources, his total cost had ballooned to 50 million credits!

"I can barely make a profit out of this model if I only charge a normal price."

At least he gained something from this effort. His understanding of this old design had deepened, which should prove useful for his next project.

With two Eternal Editions down, Ves turned his attention to the third design, a comech variant of the Caesar Augustus. Having worked on several different variants of this design gave him a unique impression of what it could do.

"It's a mech designed for heroic leaders. It's not a coincidence the coating is brilliant white. This mech is designed to inspire."

While that sounded great, Ves put some questions on whether this scenario actually occurred since the model's release.

What mech designers cook up in their imagination might not translate into practical designs. The Caesar Augustus embodied this phenomenon. The model became larger than life due to the hopeful dreams that propelled its design. In a certain perspective, it represented a high note of the last generation of mechs.

Figuring this out reignited his own passion and love for mech design. He summed up the underlying intent of this design. "Mechs don't always have to be realistic. What's wrong with a little fantasy?"

Granted, such a naive approach to mech design rarely led to critical success. The mech market centered around fulfilling their practical demands such as delivering high performance for a reasonable cost. The bloated Caesar Augustus failed to reach the heights its designer originally aimed for, and suffered for it upon its debut.

Ves wanted to chart his own path.

The Mark II had been designed with practicality and cost-efficiency in mind, while the Caesar Augustus revolved around hope. Ves wished to design a variant that embodied his own ideals instead of adhering to the demands of the market or the original designer.

An inkling of magnitude crept up in his mind. Ves faintly realized this decision affected his design philosophy. Even though Ves only grasped a glimpse of what seniors and masters referred to as design philosophy, he knew its development formed the key to advancing to their level.

"The way these people talk about design philosophy makes it clear it's not about mentality alone." Ves surmised after he recalled the few instances

where older mech designers stressed the importance of developing a design philosophy. "It involves some sort of higher state of being."

Ves had the sense that it functioned similar to the X-Factor and that it involved some sort of metaphysics. From what he heard, a well-developed design philosophy enabled a mech designer to develop a design that functioned beyond the boundaries of common science. The more advanced Journeyman-level textbooks occasionally hinted at such.

"Design philosophy and the X-Factor may even be different roads that lead to the same destination. Is this why AIs haven't taken over the job of designing mechs?" He mused.

The technology to allow computers to design mechs on their own existed for a long time. Even then, it never caught on. Design philosophy should be one of the main reasons why AIs could never match a human mind.

"Enough distractions."

Ves shook his head and turned his attention back to his design. For his third model, Ves wanted to embody his own principles. So far, his principles aspired to bring mechs to life.

He summed up his end goal. "People should look at my design and mistake it for a living entity."

His mechs didn't need to be autonomous sentient beings like some living AI. After all, he designed mechs, not robots. The difference between the two was that mechs functioned best when paired with a human pilot. Ves aimed to enhance the piloting experience by enriching the mech with lifelike qualities.

A wonderful synergy should result with this pairing. What Jarle pulled off with his customized DarkSpear should only be the tip of the spear of what Ves ultimately wanted to bring into existence.

This time Ves decided to go with an understated X-Factor for his third model. Ves didn't wish to overshadow the Caesar Augustus Eternal Edition, which ought to play the leading role in his display.

He quickly hit a snag. "How can I design a mech that's both eternal but also alive?"

Something that lived went through various phases of life. They grew stronger from the moment of their birth and declined in strength once they reached their peak. Something with a finite lifespan did not fit well with a mech that was supposed to be eternal.

He turned to a simple solution. In his imagination, anything was possible, even eternity. Ves envisioned an Immortal Sage, a being out of ancient myth just like the Instructor.

The man used to be a warrior at youth, achieving plenty of merits that fueled his career into officialdom. Through hard work and smart decisions, he achieved a higher status, eventually vaulting to a ministry before deciding to retire.

Even then, he continued to guide his country towards prosperity. Stepping back from power granted him a sober perspective on many matters. Through constant deduction and self-reflection, his mind experienced a cleansing that elevated him to immortality.

"I like this image." He smiled.

This time, he used it as the central component of his Triple Division technique. The base role remained a hybrid knight while the totem animal consisted of a mythical undying turtle.

After a few hours of composing an appropriate background for all of his images, he mashed them all together.

Surprisingly, the images didn't come to blows. The Immortal Sage and the undying turtle minded their own business. Only the hybrid knight showed some aggression but failed to uncover any openings. The two sagely images both collaborated with each other, holding the hybrid knight at bay.

"This isn't supposed to happen."

He deliberately strengthened the Sage and allocated only a limited amount of mental strength to the other two images. Ves wanted the Sage to stomp over the other two and absorb their essence in order to evolve its own.

Life threw a wrench in that plan.

"It's best not to force the situation further." He concluded. "It's my own fault for making the Immortal Sage so enlightened."

Ves went to work on a template of the Caesar Augustus with his tentative images. He couldn't help but overhaul large portions of its crowded interior. The solutions he developed for the Marc Antony Mark II could also be applied to the base model.

He made sure not to go too far, both because the frames ultimately differed in many aspects. Different armor systems led to different weight distribution and support. Ves had to figure out plenty of new solutions to simplify the internals.

Just like with the other two designs, this time Ves aimed to enhance the mech's longevity. He borrowed some of the solutions he applied on the original Caesar Augustus, saving him a lot of time.

In total, Ves spent just over a week to refine his third design. As it came into its own identity, the design already started to evoke a strong sense of life, wisdom and immortality.

As a final touch, Ves added in the Festive Cloud Generator in the form of a rolling purple cape instead of a head crest. It added to his variant's role as a ruler instead of a warrior.

"Let's call this one the Marcus Aurelius."

The Ancient Roman emperor in Old Earth's history had been regarded as something of a sage. As Ves was no expert of this time period, he merely picked the first suitable name the galactic net spat out. It sounded stately enough to convey the right emotions.

The Marcus Aurelius functioned more as a symbol rather than a war machine. While Ves maintained its capability to do battle, he much rather preferred to see it prosper in times of peace.

Ves passed over the design to the System for evaluation. He already knew how well his latest design performed, so he skimmed over most of the report. The only thing that mattered to Ves was its X-Factor.

In this regard, the System granted the design a score of C+, well below his expected target.

"Oh come on, System! Just because the images didn't cannibalize each other doesn't mean my design is any worse than the DarkSpear!"

The System stayed silent of course, but even if it knew the answer, Ves had to figure things out on his own.

Obviously, a higher quality X-Factor required some kind of interaction with his images. Allowing them to fight to the death should only be one way to spur an evolution. Ves wondered if he could get his images to evolve through voluntary synthesis.

"It's something to consider for the next time."

Right now, Ves finished his design work. All he had to do was fabricate the show models of all three designs in order to meet the requirements to participate in the Vintage Festival.

The raw materials for the Eternal Editions of the Mark II and the Caesar Augustus had already arrived. By the time he finished fabricating the show models of both designs, the resources to fabricate the Marcus Aurelius should also be shipped to his workshop.

"Carlos!" Ves called when he entered the workshop floor.

"Yes, boss?"

"Set aside your current project and help me fabricate my three show models. I've just finished their design and I'm itching to see if they measure up in reality."

"That's great!"

The two went about their work with infectious enthusiasm. Ves took the lead this time because he wanted to ensure the X-Factor for each of the models remained pure. He merely let Carlos fetch some materials or arrange some minor details to speed up the work. His employee lacked the mental strength to compete against his boss in this aspect.

The Eternal Edition of the Mark II only took a day to complete. With their extreme familiarity of the LMC's only production model, they hardly needed to pause as they used the Dortmund printer and the new assembly system to put a mech together.

Ves left the mech aside after inspecting its X-Factor. It had indeed gained a smidgen of eternity compared to his other gold label mechs, but the difference was rather small. Its design still retained something of a workhorse quality Ves had conveyed in his original vision for the Mark II.

"I should get a better result with the other two models."

This would be the first time his workshop fabricated a mech clad with compressed armor. While Ves had fabricated the fabrication of the Caesar Augustus in a virtual environment, that gave little comfort to him. Virtual fabrication only provided him with a simplified experience in an excessively ideal environment.

Only a little more than a week remained until the deadline for entry passed. Ves had to work briskly in order to make it in time.

"Let's begin."

Over a week-long period, Ves fabricated both the Caesar Augustus Eternal Edition and the Marcus Aurelius in back-to-back sessions that stretched on for many hours.

Ves faced very few difficulties with fabricating their internals, which shared many commonalities with the internals of the Mark II. He only encountered difficulties when he started fabricating compressed armor plating.

The formula used in the formation of the extremely resilient armor demanded an extreme amount of precision. Ves constantly had to watch the chemical treatment machine and the alloy compressor to make sure they applied their processes evenly.

Flat plates required relatively little effort to ensure their quality, but the process became more complicated once he started with the curved ones. Their uneven shapes added a lot of extra work for Ves as he had to find the right settings to allow the processes to seep into the plating without major deviations.

Ves barely completed the fabrication of the two expensive models within the deadline. As a final touch, Ves added in a couple of random gems with minor

effects. With his growing sum of DP, he could easily afford the 100 DP it took to add an anonymous stamp to Lucky's gems.

When Ves stored the models side-by-side in an expanded store room, he became bewitched by their mutually reinforcing auras.

Any single model represented a treasure by itself, but when they were put together, they achieved a qualitative transformation that even Carlos couldn't ignore.

"Why do I get the feeling that your show models are hiding something big?" Carlos asked with puzzlement.

Ves smiled at his employee's remark. "You have no idea how special these models are. They're eternal."

Chapter 223 Back to Bentheim

The Vintage Festival accepted his entry when he applied.

Properly speaking, Ves had to bring his show models to Bentheim before the deadline expired, but the person in charge of applications bent the rules for him. It only took a day or two until the next convoy shipped the models to Bentheim.

Ves left the arrangements of his booth to Marcella, who in turn delegated the job to her subordinates. These same people would also be staffing his booth and take care of his sales once the festival began.

"Their role in this event is to facilitate the sales process." Marcella explained over the comm. "While you don't need to be present at all times, it will be helpful if you stick to your booth and explain your designs to anyone who shows any interest in purchasing a mech. Often times, a customer can be swayed to purchase your products if you present yourself as a reputable mech designer."

"Will you be there as well?"

"I'm not going to make it." Marcella shook her head. "I'm negotiating on behalf of another client on a major order. Sorry kid, but you're still small-time as far as I'm concerned."

Fair enough. While Marcella earned a generous cut with her current contract, it didn't amount to much in absolute terms. While he recently expanded the LMC's production capabilities, it only sold a handful of Mark II's a month, far below the standards of a typical medium-scale mech manufacturer.

After saying goodbye, Ves turned his attention back to his workshop. "I should prepare for an intensive round of fabrication."

His words betrayed the confidence he held in his Eternal series. Their craftsmanship surpassed anything that Ves had produced so far. When the three models stood side-by-side, their X-Factor emanated a formless pressure that threatened to engulf the entire storage space!

"I won't believe my models will flop."

Ves gambled a lot on their success. Already, his company's savings account diminished by a whopping 120 million credits. He had no other choice but to spend the money on the raw materials to fabricate the show models. If he couldn't even manage to sell the original models, he'd be stuck with a couple of extremely expensive statues.

"All I can do now is wait."

The Festival started in a couple more weeks, leaving Ves plenty of time to get his company in order.

First, he optimized his new production line. His previous bout of fabrication exposed some flaws in his arrangements that could prove dangerous down the line. Ves nipped the latent problems in the bud and ensured that all of the machines worked properly.

By this time, their first shady orders had arrived. Dietrich arranged for some nondescript companies with boring names such as Ellis and Johnson Security or Armature Inc. to place some random component orders to the LMC. Superficially, they all appeared to be legitimate companies that all owned mechs but needed urgent replacements.

Ves wasn't fooled. They all stood for shadier organizations that wanted to make use of his workshop's unregistered and unmonitored Dortmund printer to fabricate a whole swathe of mech parts. Much of the orders his company received consisted of complex parts that regular printers couldn't handle.

Still, his Dortmund printer should provide enough assistance to Carlos that he'd be able to handle the majority of the orders by himself. Ves only took care of the most difficult orders which consisted of various compressed armor plating.

"I still think this is a bad idea. The more we fabricate, the more we become involved." Carlos repeated to Ves. "I don't want to wake up with a gun pointed at my head one day."

Ves idly waved away his concern. "Relax, Carlos. It's safe here in Cloudy Curtain. It's ten times worse if I decided to set my business up in Bentheim."

Even if he exaggerated a bit, his words possessed an element of truth. Managing your relations with the local gangs had often been considered as the cost of doing business in Bentheim.

Frankly, the sheer amount of shady activities that went on in the port system exposed the Republic's weakness. Its relatively loose grasp on society allowed an abundance of bad actors to settle between its gaps.

The weeks went by in a blur. Even the challenge of fabricating the exotic orders didn't faze Ves much. He left Carlos with the rest of the workload and

boarded his corvette which held two packed mechs, Melkor's Stanislaw and Raella's Vektrix.

Ves learned his lesson. Instead of hoping for the best, he prepared for the worst. After the last incident on Bentheim, his family arranged a permit for him to travel around with a mech escort.

He didn't leave his fate to chance and made more preparations. He contracted Sanyal-Ablin to provide armed transportation and additional security at the festival. The Coalition security company eagerly accepted the job after Ves paid them a hefty sum.

Raella, Melkor and Lucky accompanied him aboard the Barracuda. By now, Raella recovered fully from her poisoning and showed eagerness to get back into shape. Even the bad memories she got from her last trip to Bentheim didn't dim her enthusiasm to get out in the galaxy.

"Hopefully nothing happens this time." Raella remarked as she sipped a special nutrient-rich solution at the lounge. "It's annoying to fight against enemies who hide in the dark."

Ves pursed his lips in dissatisfaction. "Who can say? At least the chaos on Bentheim has subsided a bit. The Mech Corps did a good job rooting out the BLM from their hiding holes."

"Yeah, but the damage is already done."

The Bentheim Liberation Movement sabotaged a lot of critical infrastructure that kept the mech industry going. The disruption in supply chains led to far-reaching consequences to the companies down the line. Nobody enjoyed the sudden rise in costs.

Worse, many manufacturers went out of business due to their inability to generate a profit in these circumstances. This led to a significant amount of layoffs, putting many low-level laborers on the street.

This in turn fueled the indignity against the central government. Rather than blaming the BLM for disrupting the economy, they would rather lay the blame on the elites at Rittersberg.

On that depressing note, the Barracuda swiftly reached the Bentheim System in less than half a day. As his pilot and navigator Miranda Pham became increasingly more familiar with the corvette, her ability to plot a faster transition improved.

"Navigating gravitic space takes a lot of judgement." Captain Silvestra explained to Ves when he asked about the difference. "Laymen often confuse FTL travel for taking a shortcut in a dimension where distances are shorter. We're actually shifting to a range of upper dimensions where spacetime exhibits slight differences from one dimension to the next."

The key to reducing transit time laid in a ship's ability to plow the same route over and over to explore the most efficient set of upper dimensions. What complicated this process was that substantial differences in mass and volume led to different transition times.

A slow, lumbering shuttle generally did better if it kept to the lower range of dimensions, while a fast corvette like the Barracuda preferred a higher range. Ships that tried to transition into a range beyond their capacity risked being torn apart by the differences in forces exerted at various points of their hulls.

Fortunately, interstellar travel to a port system like Bentheim posed much fewer risks than normal. Their journey went without a hitch and the Barracuda effortlessly descended into the atmosphere until it reached Marcella's private mech yard.

A smartly-dressed auburn-haired woman welcomed Ves and his companions to Bentheim with a smile. "Mr. Larkinson, it's a pleasure to meet you! My

name is Antje Livinis. I'm the sales manager for Bollinger Mech Trade. Miss Bollinger has put me in charge of your sales force for the upcoming festival."

After Ves shook her dainty little hand, he regarded her with a curious expression. Unlike Bollinger who exhibited the muscular physique of an ex-veteran mech pilot, Antje looked like a fairy. That must help a lot in the business as many clients probably underestimated her poise.

"Have you seen my show models yet?"

"Oh, yes! They're absolutely fabulous!" Antje gushed with genuine enthusiasm. "They're as impressive as the artisan models in the museums! I don't know how you managed to design them like that, but if you're able to reproduce the same sensation in your production models, then I expect you'll be making a hefty amount of business."

Even though she praised his craftsmanship, she also put a couple of question marks in his ability to replicate the show models with all of their qualities intact.

"I can assure you that my fabrication skills are up to par. I can easily match their qualities in my subsequent production."

Even though the sales manager still held doubts, she chose to believe him. As a sales manager who handled a lot of routine business for Marcella, Antje had already become familiar with his Mark II. Even the silver label mechs that Carlos fabricated every week contained a smidgen of X-Factor.

Technically, the Eternal series consisted of gold label mechs, and they displayed the traits typical to this exclusive range. Even if Antje couldn't quite put her finger on why the models impressed her so much, she knew that people would pay a lot of money to own a mech that could radiate such pressure.

"Too bad my publicist Gavin isn't able to attend. He'd love to discuss the details with you."

Gavin and Calsie only worked part-time at the LMC while they focused on their studies. They still had a year to go before they graduated from the local university in Freslin.

Ves shared the virtual documents that Gavin compiled to Antje. It turned out that the sales manager performed her own analysis on his projected sales, though she didn't come up with three different scenarios.

She smiled at him. "I know the sort of people who attend this festival, and I think it's very likely your models will catch on. I think it's not too far-fetched if we assume the most optimistic scenario will take place."

Gavin's optimistic scenario envisioned a huge demand for his Eternal Edition mechs. Under the assumption that there would always be more customers, he came up with a complicated pricing scheme for each models during the four-day festival.

The Mark II Eternal Edition started sales at a whopping 40 million credits, with a limit of ten models sold each day. The limit ensured that his company wouldn't be burdened by endless orders that risked being cancelled after a couple of months.

The Caesar Augustus Eternal Edition sold at an even more incredulous price tag of 80 million credits, with only three models sold per day. Gavin predicted that many collectors wanted to own this model in the optimistic scenario, thus he jacked up the price to almost twice its production cost.

As for the Marcus Aurelius, nobody knew if anyone wanted it more than the Caesar Augustus. Due to its uniqueness and exclusivity, Gavin decided to hold a daily auction over this model. This allowed them to avoid setting a fixed price for this esoteric model.

That could either go good or bad depending on its appeal. Antje clearly questioned the need to hold an auction. "Your design is rather conservative for a variant. On paper, it's nothing impressive, though I admit it does make you forget about it once you see it in the flesh. My main concern is that others won't see it that way and refuse to raise their bids."

Failed auctions showed that Ves had overestimated the value of his designs. If he couldn't match or surpass the standard price of a Caesar Augustus, then his reputation in the mech industry could take a hit.

Ves stuck to his guns. "I'm willing to take the bet."

He charged high prices for his designs because they carried something unique. His entry into the Vintage Festival formed something of a trial balloon. Ves wanted to gauge whether the public had any stomach for mechs enhanced by the X-Factor. The LMC's entire business model rested on the outcome of this event.

Chapter 224 Colleagues

The Vintage Festival took place at a city called Ansel. Situated far away from the bustling metropolis of Dorum, Ansel offered more established mech designers a place to do their business. It became particularly renowned for its Ansel University of Mech Design, an educational institution solely dedicated to teaching the art of mech design.

Even though Ves studied mech design at the Rittersberg University of Technology, in truth its mech design course wasn't all that great. The AUMD held a lot more prestige in the mech industry due to its deep connections to the local mech industry.

A tight network of influential alumni regularly contributed to the prestigious school with lectures, tours, internships and even exclusive textbooks. Each student who graduated from Ansel's mech design course received numerous lucrative opportunities that gave them a head-start in the industry.

A fleet of armored shuttles escorted by several mechs on foot reached the city after several hours of travel. Many other transports heading to Ansel enjoyed protection so the fleet attracted little attention.

Ves left his shuttle after they arrived at the local convention center. Meanwhile, Raella and Melkor stayed in their mechs and went ahead to his show booth. The organization allowed Ves a single armed guard to accompany him.

"Looks like we made it in time." He said while carrying Lucky.

Not a lot of people had arrived in the morning. Ansel's distance from Dorum led to fewer visitors who decided to stop by on a whim. This insured that the majority of the visitors held some actual interest in the theme.

The convention center consisted of a massive white-faced main hall with three different side halls spread in equal directions. The whole layout resembled a cross, with one leg bigger than the rest.

Every mech designer converged at the main hall first. Before the festival began, the managing director had some words to say. Ves entered the bright white walls illuminated both by Bentheim's sun and some added light sources. Gleaming metallic mechs in various shapes and sizes glistened in the light, mesmerising all who entered this opened halls.

Many of these honored lastgen mechs came from local hands. The neatly projected captions made it clear that half of their designers graduated from the AUMD. Even with the benefit of bias, Ves knew that all of the designs deserved their places of honor.

When he reached the end of the hall, Ves joined his fellow mech designers circling a stage. All of them stood still, mesmerized by the mech elevated to the highest place of honor.

"No way! That's the Reckoner!" A mech designer who just entered after Ves screamed out. "How can one be here?!"

The Reckoner was one of this generation's famed artillery mechs. Designed and sold in the heartland sectors of the galaxy, it turned into an iconic sight in the last forty years among the second-rate states that could afford it. Many of the mech designers present in the hall had never seen one in the flesh.

With its eight heavy spider legs and its relatively flat torso, the mech had been designed as a low-profile artillery platform. It only really possessed one single weapon, a thick, extendable howitzer that fired off massive explosive shells or railgun projectiles depending on its configuration.

Entire cities turned to ruin after a single Reckoner unleashed its entire payload. All of this the artillery mech accomplished many kilometers away. In truth, its heavy cannons barely stayed within the limits of acceptable firepower.

What impressed the designers here the most besides its presence here was its age. Various marks and scratch marred its faded camouflage coating. Even though Ves did not detect any substantial X-Factor, its worn-out components gave the Reckoner a special feeling of a machine that did its duty but tired of the job.

An hour went by as mech designers kept converging around the Reckoner. It must be the most expensive mech at the festival by far. Even Ves didn't dare to put a price on this mech. It was worth its weight in exotics as pretty much all of its components incorporated them in their construction.

As Ves patiently waited for the manager to arrive, Ves received a distinctive ping from his comm. He looked up his device and saw one of his apps informing him that another Society member was among the crowd.

The other member received the same notification and chose to home in on Ves. Minutes later, an elderly looking man approach Ves. "Knight Larkinson? My name is Reesc McDonnell, a Squire of the Clifford Society."

Ves shook hands with the elderly squire with a bemused expression. He couldn't quite get a grip on a Squire as old as Reesc. Every other Squire he encountered at Leemar only had a couple of years on him. The man sensed his confusion and smiled.

"Don't be so surprised. The Squires you've met at Leemar are mostly recent graduates that are trying to keep their options open. Those of us who come from outside Coalition space often blind themselves to the challenges of competing against actual Coalition citizens. Most of them will return to their home states after years of fruitless effort."

Unspoken in his explanation was that Reesc had likely been one of these dreamers. After finding out that his skills barely impressed the elitist Coalition citizens, he packed up his bags and shuffled back to the Republic in order to make a living. The fact that he languished as a Squire up to when his hair turned grey meant that Reesc didn't deserve any respect.

"My apologies. I'm not used to seeing older Society members." Ves replied. "As you've said, those that gathered at Leemar still have a full life ahead of them. If I hadn't already had plans, I might have lingered at Leemar as well."

They chatted a bit about their mech careers. Like Ves, Reesc entered a competition held by Leemar and managed to reach a notable rank. However, his foundation didn't amount to much, and he only reached the top 500 by sheer luck. Even after he gained access to the Star Library, Reesc never got to read a lot of books.

"Merits are simply too hard to come by!" The old man lamented. "I don't have anything to trade, so the only way I got them is by doing these tedious long-

term missions. Even then, they only pay a handful of merits after you slave away for years. It's completely impossible to earn enough merits this way!"

While he agreed with Reesc's complaints, Ves pointed out an alternative.

"Haven't you considered taking one of the riskier missions? They pay quite well for a couple of months of work."

"Absolutely not! The pay is better, but the conditions are awful! Mech designers like us belong behind a desk, not at some hostile alien planet while shells are raining down above our heads! Leave the battlefield work to the people who signed up to fight!"

As Reesc chatted on about his lack of opportunities, Ves increasingly came to dislike the stodgy Squire. The elderly mech designer had a golden opportunity to develop his skills and knowledge through trading merits for access to textbooks, and what did Reesc do? He squandered decades of his life performing the safest and most unrewarding missions imaginable!

Ves finally welcomed the arrival of the managing director. Everyone hushed their conversation and even Reesc had to shut his mouth. Everyone stared beneath the legs of the Reckoner as a small platform lifted upwards from below.

A much more distinguished gentleman appeared on stage. The man looked at the hundreds of mech designers gathered here today and nodded in satisfaction.

"It pleases me to see so many of you take part in my festival." The director began. "The last generation of mechs may slowly be forgotten, but our memories of this remarkable period will live on. Our job is to remind the public that the last generation will never be consigned to the archives!"

Everyone cheered in unison at those words, though Ves doubted everyone present here agreed with the director. He had the feeling that at least half of

the mech designers had no other choice but to attend in order to make some last bit of money out of their aging production licenses.

The director went on to explain some practical matters after his opening. The organizers held different events each day in the main hall. For the most part, only Journeyman Mech Designers qualified to participate in the main exhibitions, so Ves tuned out the speech. He was mostly here to sell mechs instead of trying to gain prestige.

Once the director reached the end of his speech, the mech designers dispersed. The main hall became open to the general public, where the managing director officially marked the opening of the festival.

"I don't need to be here."

Like Ves, many of the Apprentices decided not to linger and headed to their booths in the side halls. As he walked to his booth, he glanced at the show models along the way.

Most of them appeared familiar to Ves. While he couldn't name their exact models, the Apprentices mostly licenced the same designs. All of them were prevalent in Republic space.

As with previous years, the quality of the show models left something to be desired. The harsh reality of setting up a business among thousands of competitors left many mech designers at the brink of their finances. A significant amount of show models consisted of bottom-tier frontline mechs. Some even sold for as low as five million credits!

Ves thanked his lucky stars that he ended up with a better start when his father gifted him the System.

Once Ves arrived at his booth, he beheld his three show models. The Mark II Eternal Edition, the Caesar Augustus Eternal Edition and the Marcus Aurelius all displayed their full glory with pride. The similarity between the three models

betrayed their common origin, but the distinctive traits that Ves imparted in them allowed them to develop their own distinctive look.

"Wow! Who made these models?"

"Who would be so extravagant to license a comech?! Do you know how much it costs to fabricate a single of these machines?!"

"Whoever's bored enough to work with the Caesar Augustus design must be a moneybags or something!"

A dozen mech designers who occupied the booths next to the one reserved by Ves had gathered over. Compared the Caesar Augustus and its illustrious variants, their cheap mechs looked like ugly ducklings before a swan. Some of the designers grew jealous, hence the mildly snide remarks.

"Make way please! This is my booth!"

When Ves appeared behind their midst, the mech designers turned around. More than half of them became astonished at his age, while the rest figured that he was some sort of scion of a rich and powerful family. No matter their thoughts, they all smothered their words and politely parted aside.

"It's a pleasure to meet you! Where did you get your production licenses? Did you pay them on your own?"

"Are you interested in collaborating with us on a joint project? We'll give you the majority share!"

Ves mostly ignored the solicitations from his colleagues. At his level, he stopped taking notice of these low-tier designers. Even if they reached the Apprentice level through their talents or connections, they obviously didn't have much of a future like Reesc.

He turned around and regarded the crowd with a forceful expression. "Please disperse! You're blocking the way for my customers! The festival is just about to start, so you'll have plenty of time to admire my designs!"

A couple of designers found fault with his attitude.

"Who are you to tell us what to do?!"

"I'm older than you! When you were still in diapers, I've already graduated with a degree in mech design!"

Ves didn't fall for their trap. He stared at them wordlessly while holding a glowering Lucky. His dour face and his lack of response gave his fellow colleagues no opportunities to seek some benefits from him. They eventually walked away with bitter expressions.

After he put down Lucky to let his pet stroll about, Ves approach Antje who supervised the placement of the final props. Various projectors, posters, simulator pods and other gadgets occupied his spacious booth, all of which enhanced the shopping experience.

"Don't you think you brought too much stuff?" Ves asked with worry. In his eyes, all of these devices attracted attention away from his model.

Antje shook her head. "Your show models don't seem to have any difficulties attracting attention. You should worry more about catching the attention of your potential customers from admiring your designs."

Marcella's protege sounded a lot more optimistic than before. "Do you think they'll really catch on with the crowd?"

"I can guarantee you they will. Compared to the mechs of your neighbors, yours are the only decent ones in range. The contrast will heighten the appeal of your products."

Her words certainly rang true. Ves couldn't help but let out a smile as he looked forward to meeting his first customers.

Chapter 225 Toys For Boys

The traffic started pouring in after an hour into the festival. Most of the early visitors consisted of average people who wanted to avoid the crowded main hall. The opening ceremony started off with a bang. If not for the main hall's excellent isolation, the side halls would have been inundated with music and cheers.

Ves got a notion of how well his show models attracted attention when he noticed a lot of foot traffic heading in his direction. Only around ten percent of the show models in the hall consisted of premium mechs.

The Caesar Augustus drew the most attention, but the Marcus Aurelius also held a certain appeal. A loose variety of visitors arrived at his booth to gawk at the expensive models up close.

"They're just like the masterwork models at the show halls!"

"What is this design? The Caesar Augustus?"

"Oh. Let's go then. I heard the Augustus was a flop."

"Are you kidding? You're blind if you call this mech a flop! Just look at the detail of this machine!"

Ves couldn't tell if the X-Factor or the rarity of his show models had a bigger influence on the crowd. Whatever the case, more than two dozen people of varying walks of life quickly congregated around his booth.

To his regret, none of them looked like potential customers. They ranged from couples hauling along their kids to career mech pilots on leave. Their clothing and lack of escorts made it clear that they didn't have the credits to spend on something as extravagant as a mech.

Even if they didn't spend a single credit on his products, Ves didn't care too much. The day had only started and peak time came later.

The constant number of people lingering at his booth attracted the attention others who wanted to see what the fuss was about. His models gained a steady amount of exposure.

The kids and the adults who grew up during the golden period of the last generation worshipped his spin on the Caesar Augustus. The Eternal Edition's glorious aura infected their minds with fanciful delusions where they imagined playing the hero.

The Marcus Aurelius on the other hand appealed to the older crowd. Compared to the bright and vivid Caesar Augustus, the sage-like mech exuded an aura of peaceful timelessness. That turned off those who craved constant action, but it put the elderly folk at peace as they thought about the legacies they left behind.

Only the Mark II Eternal Edition proved to be a disappointment. Its aggressive aura paled in comparison to glory exuded by the Caesar Augustus, while its inferior quality and cost condemned it to the role of a sidekick.

While Ves found it unfair for his cheapest model, he still hoped for a change in fortune. Once the people with money arrived, its price tag should warrant the forgotten mech second look.

The only unexpected surprise he encountered had to do with his virtual mechs. The recent promotion of his DarkSpear also had a knock-on effect on the recognition of his other designs.

"Will you be selling a dagger assassin like the one you designed for Jarle?" A young man asked.

"Jarle's custom mech is an exclusive design. He won't be happy if I make more copies available." Ves patiently explained. "Besides, I made a lot of

expert tweaks on its design that make it exceedingly difficult to pilot for the average player. Only a top pilot with lightning-fast reaction speeds can get a grip on its controls."

The man and a few other fans looked disappointed at his answer, but Ves had no choice. He signed a contract with Jarle that stipulated that his mech should be the only virtual copy of its design.

Frankly, Ves got a little bored of the mundane questions. Very few festival goers showed any serious interest in purchasing his models.

Occasionally some other mech designers visited his booth. Their jealousy flared up when they watched the steadily growing numbers crowding at his booth. The organizers even stationed a couple of extra guards in the area to keep them well-behaved.

Sometimes they tried to argue with Ves about his design choices.

One skinny designer took stock with one of his designs and made his objections loud and clear. "Hey! You made a mistake with this mech! The arms are protruding forward too much! Don't you know how to balance a mech?"

Ves grew a little angry at the ignorant remark. When he turned around to reply, Antje quickly held his arm.

"Don't argue with trolls. You'll only feed them. You'll never be able to win a debate against someone who is set out to make trouble in public."

The reminder cooled his head, allowing him to regain his rationality. Antje had a point. He had everything to lose and nothing to gain by arguing in public. Still, his pride as a mech designer made it difficult to ignore the blow.

Antje whispered something on her comm. "Look. Security is already handling the issue. They won't allow the festival to be spoiled by ignorant loudmouths."

A couple of security guards took hold of the designer and quickly hauled him away.

"Hey! Unhand me you muscle heads! I'm a highly successful mech designer! My mechs are up ahead! You can't throw me out!"

The mech designer threw up so much commotion that the guards injected him with a sedative. That quickly shut him up. Ves and a couple of others shook their heads at the pathetic sight.

"I remember seeing his show models." One of the visitors remarked. "They hardly amount to anything. I can't imagine anyone willing to buy those heaps of junk."

"Maybe that's why he lashed out. His designs are crap so he wishes that every other design is crap."

Sadly, other designers kept the unwanted critique going. With hardly any activity at their own booths, they strolled around the halls and let out their frustration at the first decent mechs they encountered. As Ves offered some of the best mechs among the Apprentices, he became a frequent target for snide remarks and discouraging advice.

Only the fact that they maintained a cordial tone prevented security from dragging them out of earshot. Their remarks even had a conspiratorial tone to them as many visitors lacked the technical background to understand the truth of their words.

Many issues in mech design involved complex interconnected design choices. If Ves changed one tiny aspect, then he had to make adjustments to ten different sections of his designs. Sometimes, what appeared to be the most optimal solution turned out to be a trap.

The most important goal that mech designers had to keep in mind was to complete a practical design. Often times, that meant that the designers had to

dial back their ambitions in order to ensure their design remained functionally balanced. Pursuing peak performance in one area often came at a ruinous cost in another area.

These subtleties became lost once you engaged in an argument about specific design choices. The perception of the crowd turned ambivalent once they heard remarks like 'the arms are too protruded' or 'the limbs are too stiff for long-term battlefield deployments'.

Ves tried to be the better man and decided to close his ears to the noise. Despite the efforts of his fellow mech designers, his show models exhibited enough attraction that they constantly drew more visitors.

He even got to meet his first potential customer. The woman looked like a bureaucrat delegated to do some errands for his boss. While she threw an admiring glance towards the Caesar Augustus, its ludicrous price tag almost frightened her to the bones. She quickly diverted her eyes towards the more modest Mark II.

Antje introduced its features. "The Marc Antony Mark II is a major revision from the Mark II, and is currently deployed by mercenaries and companies around the Republic. The Eternal Edition of the Mark II features several enhancements that make it suitable as a display model. The Mark II Eternal Edition is an ideal design to inspire your company and intimidate your competitors."

"That sounds great, but this mech line lacks compressed armor." The businesswoman retorted. "At the price you're charging for this mech, I might as well procure a comech."

"That's your decision to make, but you'll be better off if you procure the Mark II. Display mechs aren't meant to be deployed in battle. The quality of the armor hardly matters if its role is to impress the people who are working or

visiting your headquarters. Just look at the frame and forget about its specs. Feel how it calls out to you. Can you feel your blood pumping faster?"

The businesswoman wavered a bit. "Now that you mention it, this mech does seem to have a motivating effect."

In the Age of Mechs, humanity worshipped mechs to a degree that elevated them beyond the battlefield. An informal custom emerged where certain companies put mechs in front of their headquarters and important offices to show off their wealth.

The practice caught on, and more companies started putting up display models for various reasons.

For example, an aggressive skirmisher mech encouraged a company's employees to be proactive and to take more risks.

A mobile rifleman mech encouraged employees to be more flexible in their approach and to head off potential dangers in advance.

A heavy knight proclaimed the company to be an enduring fixture in the market. No matter what its competitors threw at them, they remained unassailable.

All of this sounded like hyperbole, but many academic studies have proven that the custom did indeed bring about a subtle psychological effect. The difference often amounted to a couple of percentage points, but for some large companies that quickly added up to a few billion credits.

Many businessmen still doubt the actual truth of the matter. Only a small minority of companies actually engaged in this custom. The rest considered the practice to be wasteful and needlessly indulgent. 'Toys for boys' they thought derisively.

Unfortunately for Ves, Antje didn't manage to make a sale this time. The businesswoman shook her head after she spent a couple of minutes taking in the Mark II's aura.

"I'll have to decline your offer. Your mech doesn't possess the traits my superior is looking for in a display model." She turned to the nearby Caesar Augustus. "Your other models look more suitable, but the price..."

The Marcus Aurelius would be auctioned in the evening while the Caesar Augustus sold for 80 million credits. Either mechs had been priced out of reach of nearly every company in the Republic.

Even though his first potential customer shied away, a couple of other serious buyers expressed their interest. Ves mainly stood by and let his salespersons do the talking. All of them worked for Marcella, so they possessed ample competence in this area.

Ves only intervened when the more technical-minded buyers started asking complicated questions.

Despite the increasing number of potential buyers drawn to his booth, his salespeople didn't manage to close a deal. The number one objection raised by these people was that Ves charged way too much for his mechs. His price levels did not conform to the market where people expected a mech that offered a certain level of performance to charge only so much money.

For example, the Mark II Eternal Edition delivered almost the same performance as the vanilla Mark II. However, their prices differed substantially. The Eternal Edition sold for 40 million credits while the regular Mark II sold for only 28 million credits.

Many potential buyers couldn't accept this 12 million credits premium!

As the afternoon rolled on, his booth still didn't manage to make a sale. Even as the crowd around his booth grew to more than a hundred, the buyers among them all kept their wallets closed.

Even Antje started showing her concern. She pulled Ves to the side. "I think we've misjudged the market demand for your mechs. You've succeeded in drawing a lot of interest, but that doesn't matter if you can't convert any of that interest into actual sales. I think we should adjust our price levels."

"It's too soon to lower our prices. There's still half a day to go before the first day is over."

"You don't realize how important it is to deliver a strong performance on the opening day." Antje shook her head. "The organizers keep track of every mech designer's sales record and publicise the list in front of the halls for everyone to see. If you end up in the bottom of the list, you'll discourage other buyers from taking you seriously."

Ves forgot about that detail. He showed some actual worry this time. "I understand the severity of the situation, but I'm not willing to budge on my prices. At least wait until the evening. If we haven't sold anything by that time, I'll reconsider the matter."

Even if others thought he behaved excessively greedy, his products earned the premium he charged. His potential buyers might be discouraged for now, but once they strolled around the convention center, they might change their minds.

Chapter 226 Price Level

Setting the right price mattered a lot in the mech industry. The MTA maintained a public record on every certified mech sold by a mech designer. Potential customers often looked up his recent record to get an estimate on the value of his products.

The initial price often set the standard.

Consider coming up with a mundane product like a pair of shoes. These days, modern manufacturing techniques have turned these articles of footwear into a cheap commodity that could be bought for rock-bottom prices. Some of the more affluent consumers even fabricate their own if they own a household 3D printer.

Most shoe manufacturers saw little future in trying to compete on price and volume. Instead, they went into the opposite direction, coming up with something fancy by employing famous fashion designers and incorporating trace exotics in their products.

All of that cost a lot of money, so the shoe manufacturers charged a higher premium for their fancy shoes. Sometimes they charged fifty times the unit cost of a single pair of shoes.

It sounded like a scam, right? Yet many shoe manufacturers sold out their most exclusive and expensive products the moment they released them on the market. They painstakingly built up a brand for excellence that consumers trusted.

Put in a cynical way, a strong brand effectively brainwashed the market. Consumers believed that the high prices the manufacturers adopted represented genuine value.

Sometimes, this even turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. As brands grew in recognition and value, people who owned them earned more social recognition. Clothes made the man and woman.

Every company in pretty much every sector aimed to built up a brand like this. Unfortunately for Ves, the Living Mech Company hadn't reached this level yet. It barely got off the starting line.

To charge a twelve million credit premium for the Mark II Eternal Edition could be considered arrogant and premature. Neither his company nor his design achieved a strong enough brand to let him get away with such an outrageous price hike.

At least according to conventional wisdom.

"Then again, nothing what I do adheres to conventional wisdom." Ves said to himself.

Ves faced two main hindrances to getting his audience accept his higher prices.

First, he barely started operating a year ago, and the LMC only came into existence a couple of months ago.

While he built up his company's brand on Cloudy Curtain, extending it to the vast and limitless Bentheim market required an even greater investment than before. Throwing a couple of billion credits on ad campaigns would barely be able to bump his company's profile from zero percent to one percent awareness.

Second, the true value of his products lay in the X-Factor, which had a definite effect on people but could not be measured directly. In addition, since Ves wished to keep his knowledge of the X-Factor a trade secret, he couldn't even direct the audience to take note of its effects.

Buyers had to trust in their gut feeling to appreciate his mechs enough to fork over the extra premium.

Yet they weren't always stupid.

The more credits at stake, the more they started thinking with their brains instead of their guts. When they looked at the Mark II Eternal Edition and

inspected its specs, they would know that its performance simply didn't match its price.

If there was one thing consumers hated, it was being made aware that they were overcharging for a product. A strong brand blinded consumers to this occurrence, but Ves didn't enjoy such a luxury at the moment.

A purchase should feel good. Ves hoped that anyone who decided to buy his mechs felt happy that they went for his designs. He'd leave a bad taste in their mouths if he appeared to be overcharging his products. This explained his current lack of sales.

As visitors kept pouring into the convention center, Ves still hadn't made a sale. The few potential buyers among the crowd soundly rejected his greedy prices and turned elsewhere to satisfy their cravings.

Even his neighboring booths sold a couple of mechs. Ves didn't think much of the mundane-looking mechs neighboring his booth, but their mech designers joyfully appealed to the crowd milling in front of his show models.

The prices of their mechs ranged from ten to twenty million credits. From what Ves could see, the desperate mech designers didn't even charge much of a premium for their mechs. They'd barely make more than half-a-million credits after deducting their production costs and license fees.

Still, as poor as they behaved, at least they made some progress. Ves on the other hand sat with empty hands while the first day of the festival already progressed halfway.

"It comes down to feeling." Ves realized after musing about this point. "There's got to be a way to make the feeling more poignant."

He turned his head to the nearby simulator pods. Marcella's organization brought ten pods to his booth to allow the guests to try out the virtual versions of his show models.

They loosely set a limit of ten minutes per guest so that every potentate got a turn. Even then, around fifty eager guests waited in line.

Ves noted that everyone who wanted to try out a simulation consisted of average festival goers. While that helped leave a good impression behind, the mass of people blocked his potential customers from accessing the pods quickly.

Ves immediately turned to Antje. "I think it's best to encourage our potential customers to try out the simulators. Let's cut back on access to the pods to the general public."

"Hm. Good idea. While not everyone who expresses interest in our mechs is a potentate, there are enough that it's worthwhile so set some pods aside."

The sales manager immediately went to work. She set three pods aside and instructed the sales representatives to encourage their use by anyone expressing interest in the mechs.

Half an hour went by as the new policy went into effect. Ves sat back and watched as the potential customers got an opportunity to experience the mechs up close. Their attitudes of his products changed once they got a taste of piloting the mechs.

While the experience paled in comparison to entering the actual cockpits, the rules forbid the practice out of safety concerns.

"I still need an extra oomph to get across the idea that my mechs are different."

He looked at his models and compared them to the simulated footage displayed by the various projectors at his booth. The projected mechs looked a lot more vivid due to their motion and something else that Ves had overlooked.

"The Festive Cloud Generators are inactive."

Ves declined to add the generator to his lightly modified Caesar Augustus, he did add them to his variants. The Mark II Eternal Edition featured a striking red vertical head crest while the Marcus Aurelius as a rolling purple cape. When both modules turned active, it made the mech seem larger than life.

However, the organizers strictly prohibited the activation of any show models. Even turning on the lights posed too much of a risk. Still, Ves wanted to try and see if he could get an exemption on this rule.

He summoned up the hall manager. A round-bellied man with a moustache showed up. He dressed in a weirdly formal costume that emphasized the girth of his belly. In an age where various weight-reducing treatments existed, being fat was more of a fashion statement than a sign of obesity.

"What a wonderful trio of mechs!" The hall manager exclaimed as he arrived at his booth. A couple of security officers had to shove the crowd aside to allow his portly body to get close. "I love what you did to the Caesar Augustus! It's one of the best I've ever seen! You could apply for a masterwork certificate from the MTA with this beauty!"

Ves awkwardly laughed. "I'm still too junior to think about such a thing."

Mechs had to meet a lot of strict criteria before they became eligible for a masterwork certificate. Generally, only Senior and Master Mech Designers possessed the skills to reach this standard.

"Then what seems to be the problem?"

"I'm looking to turn on a function of two of my show models." Ves replied and guided him to a projection that showed the Mark II Eternal Edition and the Marcus Aurelius in action. "The Festive Cloud Generator injects minute particles into harmless water vapor to achieve these visual effects."

"I do admit the mechs look dazzling when the so-called cloud generators are active, but the potential risks are numerous. The main reason why we don't allow mechs to run any systems is because their reactors have to come online. Even at their lowest operating level, they generate a significant amount of heat and energy. If anything goes wrong with these reactors, the consequences could be catastrophic to the nearby crowd."

The hall manager gestured to the pressing mass of people who became enchanted by his mechs. From a public safety standpoint, the man had a point. From a technical standpoint, the chance the reactors malfunctioned and exploded was virtually nil.

"These are brand-new mechs that have gone through certification. The MTA insured they're safe. What's the harm in turning on a couple of vapor generators? Think of how much better my mechs will look like. The festival will be better off if the crowd can see my mechs at their best."

His arguments slowly persuaded the hall manager to the merits of letting his mechs appear at their best.

Ves figured out that the shrewd man in charge of this side hall competed against the managers of the other halls to attract the most visitors. The manager never told him this directly, but his responses hinted at this dynamic at work. The more he talked, the more he honed in on these benefits.

"My mechs are already one the biggest draws in this hall. I know you have reservations for turning on those cheaply-built mechs, but my products are different. I didn't cut any corners when I designed and fabricated these mechs. I can truly guarantee you that nothing will go wrong if I'm allowed to turn on the generators."

It took five more minutes to squeeze an exemption out of the reluctant manager. At the end, Ves had the feeling he was merely providing an excuse

for something the manager actually wanted at the beginning. His training and instructions prevented him from complying right away, but talk long enough and even the steel-hearted started to waver.

When Ves quickly entered the cockpits and turned them online at their lowest level, the entire crowd held their breath. Since he received an exemption to run his mechs at their lowest activity level, he sneakily bent the rules and turned a few more lights on as well.

The difference became apparent right away. A low murmur of appreciation ran through the crowd as the two models underwent a transformation.

The exclusive Marcus Aurelius especially appeared dramatic. Its rolling purple cape reinforced the regal quality to his eternal mech. While it always became a hit with the older folk, even the kids and teenagers started to admire the sage-like model.

As the only two mechs that received permission to come online, the spectacle instantly doubled the crowd. Ves didn't care about that but instead directed his attention to an affluent visitor who just exited a simulator pod.

When the man entered the pod, the mechs still remained dormant. Only when he got to enjoy the simulations for ten short minutes did he emerge with an entirely new view. His gaze admired the aggressive contours of the Mark II and the ethereal ambiance radiated by the Marcus Aurelius.

He turned his attention back to the Mark II after a while. It appeared his budget only allowed him to consider the cheapest offering. Even if Ves planned to auction the Marcus Aurelius, its high production cost ensured that it would not come cheap.

Eventually, the potential customer made a choice. He caught the attention of a sales representative. "I'd like to purchase a copy of this design."

Ves smiled when he heard those words. If everything went right, he just made his first sale.

"This is just the start."

Chapter 227 Auction

The first buyer turned out to be a sentimentalist. He wanted to purchase the Mark II Eternal Edition for himself and not for any business purposes. Evidently, he had a lot of money to spare.

Ves had the feeling the man earned his money through less than legal means. His name turned up very few records and the details he provided about himself hardly illuminated his life.

No matter what, a sale was a sale and the man possessed enough legal standing to sign a contract.

The first sale opened the floodgates. After a couple of more potential buyers tried the mechs first-hand in a virtual environment, they became sold to the idea of owning the mech.

Their backgrounds ranged from retired mercenary commanders to well-off business owners. Ves soon reached his daily quota of ten Mark II's sold in the next couple of hours.

Once the quota had been met, most potential customers that came afterwards expressed regret for arriving too late. Many of them had visited his booth earlier and mentally dismissed his designs as overpriced, but once they heard how his Mark II caught fire they came back too late.

Antje smiled with satisfaction at the sight. "Herd mentality is at work now. Your Mark II Eternal Edition has turned into a must-own design. If nothing goes wrong, most of these latecomers will be back tomorrow."

"Hopefully they'll still be in a rush after a good night's sleep. I'd hate to see them lose their drive to purchase my mechs after they had some time to

reflect." Ves remarked. "Herd mentality only works as long as there's momentum propelling them forward."

Ten Marc Antony Mark II Eternal Edition mechs represented around 400 million credits in value! If Ves sold out for the next three days, he'd make over 1.2 billion credits in revenue alone! After deducting all of his expenses, he'd still end up with roughly a third of that incredible sum, enough to fill up his current shortfall.

"It will be better if my Caesar Augustus start getting sold as well."

Many potential customers still shied away from the Caesar Augustus Eternal Edition. Its intimidating price tag of 80 million credits sounded a bit too ludicrous even for enthusiasts. The ability to make a direct comparison between the Eternal Edition and the original model hurt a lot. They could get an original Caesar Augustus for well under 60 million credits, after all!

Maybe Ves had been a little bit too greedy for charging a 20 million credit premium on an intangible benefit. If nobody pointed out the design's excellent X-Factor, how could his potential customers not feel scammed if they decided to purchase a model?

At least the Mark II benefited from not having a direct comparison. While unmech variants of the Caesar Augustus existed, their specs different substantially from each other. The Mark II also acquitted itself well if someone compared its specs to those other variants that lacked compressed armor.

Once the first day of the festival transitioned to the evening, the events in the main hall started amping up. While many visitors left the side halls to join the festivities, many more guests arrived from elsewhere who found the press of the crowd intimidating. The side halls received plenty of fresh faces, and the number of people who congregated around his booth never diminished.

Every sales representative focused on pushing the Caesar Augustus. Despite setting a daily quota of three mechs, the fish simply refused to take the bait. Ves began to grow more concerned. His happiness for selling out the Mark II aside, he'd miss out on a lot of lost opportunities if his more expensive product line did poorly.

After a while, Antje came back to him after getting a pulse of his well-heeled crowd.

"There are still people who are eying the Caesar Augustus." She began. "Yet they're holding back due to their price. Their willingness to buy is pretty high, but not high enough to justify 80 million credits. Worse, they know that others are holding the same doubts. I think they've reached a tacit agreement to wait out your resolve."

"What does that mean?" Ves frowned. "Are they sure that no one will snap up my mech at my asking price?"

"That's exactly right. The seasoned collectors among them are familiar with this game. When they think a seller is demanding too much, they discourage everyone from making the first step. This forces the seller to lower prices. It's an open conspiracy."

Essentially, the two sides waited out each other's patience. The first side to give in lost the advantage. While Ves found the issue rather thorny, at least the willingness to buy his centerpiece model exist.

He worked his brain over the problem. "All we need to break their game is to force out a single sale. Once the first quota is sold, the second and third will be snapped up instantly."

"Again, the first step is the hardest. We don't have any other means to compel a sale."

Props and visual spectacles helped set the mood, but Ves had exhausted his options. The hall manager didn't allow him to turn on the Caesar Augustus because it didn't feature a Festive Cloud Generator. The striking looks of the Marc Antony and the Marcus Aurelius with their constant emission of colored vapor made the Caesar Augustus look plain.

"It will help if we turn off the two other mechs."

Antje shook her head. "We'll cut off all the buzz we generated so far. We can't stop midway. Besides, you still plan to auction the Marcus Aurelius, right? We have to do it when it appears at its best."

That gave Ves an idea. "The schedule called for auctioning the Marcus Aurelius in the late evening, but why not do it now? I think we can work up a buying fever if we auction the Marcus Aurelius. Those who didn't manage to get their hands on my exclusive variant can set their sights on the Caesar Augustus instead."

"That's a great idea, but there are a lot of risks involved if we auction your exclusive mech too early." The sales manager warned. "The lack of buying fever among your more expensive models may lead to an anemic bidding procedure. To my judgement, it's still too soon."

Something had to change. Either Ves decided to hold the auction now, or wait out the patience of his buyers. He preferred to take action immediately.

"Hold the auction now. Don't worry too much about the risks. I'm sure that there are people here who have been eying the Marcus Aurelius. It's a unique variant and only four of them will ever exist."

They held an informal auction in an hour, leaving enough time for those who kept their eye on his mech to return to his booth. Antje took care of the arrangements and made some space in front of his booth.

She also employed a specialized auction software that tracked all of the bids. Eligible bidders merely had to speak out to register their bids, which would be displayed in the open by the largest projector they possessed.

If anyone wanted to stay anonymous for some reason, they could also input their bids into their comms. As long as they verified their identities and proved they had enough money, the bidders had the option to hide their names and affiliations.

As the skies darkened outside Ansel, the auction finally went underway. Ves tried to hype up the crowd by taking the stage and explaining what he did to the Marcus Aurelius. He devoted his speech on both its technical aspects and its vision.

"This is more than a Caesar Augustus with a cape. This is a symbol!" Ves proclaimed as he gestured his hands towards his newest variant. "Imagine putting it in front of your headquarters or your collection hall. Who would diminish you when you own the king of mechs? Best of all, the model is extremely enduring and will last for hundreds of years with proper maintenance. Even as it ages, its essential quality will remain!"

Ves expected that anyone who bought this mech would never deploy it in battle, so he emphasized its brilliance as a display model. Once he finished his speech, he left the stage for Antje who finally started the auction.

"The price starts at zero credits! Please bid in increments of 100,000 bright credits. No other currencies or bartering will be accepted. Who wants to make the first bid?"

"I do!" A random mercenary laughed. "I'll take it for 100,000 credits!"

"200,000!"

"500,000!"

"3 million credits!"

"10 million!"

"10.1 million!"

"10.2 million!"

"10.3 million!"

"10.4 million!"

"You pussies! We'll be stuck here for the entire night if you two go on like that!
30 million credits!"

"I can say the same for you! Do you really think this eye candy is worth 30 million? I bid 45 million credits!"

A low murmur ran through the crowd as they heard that sum. 45 million credits was considered the floor price for a Caesar Augustus.

Now that the opportunistic low-ball offers stopped, the pace of the bidding reached a calmer stage. It took a few seconds for a new bid to follow-up on the old one. The bidders each looked at each other as if trying to figure out if they reached their limit.

The mass of people who gathered to join the fun made it difficult to figure out who still wanted to bid. Ves himself estimated the auction started with over a hundred bidders, but now that the price surpassed bargain bin territory, only around twenty serious bidders still remained.

"55 million credits."

"56 million credits."

"60 million credits."

"61 million credits!"

The auction further slowed down after reaching the magical figure of 60 million credits. For the same sum, the bidders could order an original Caesar Augustus fabricated by National Aeromotives themselves. Any bid that surpassed this sum meant that the bidder placed a lot of value on what Ves had contributed to the original design.

"63 million credits."

"63.5 million credits."

"64 million credits."

"64.5 million credits."

The remaining bidders began to grow reluctant. Some stayed patient and refrained from speaking out, while others started making bids anonymously.

"An anonymous bidder just put up 67 million credits!" Antje announced as the projection shifted. "Come on, is that all? Will you allow this precious mech to get away from your grasp?"

"Enough!" A powerful voice boomed. A man in military uniform stood up and silenced the tentative bidders in an instant. "I bid 80 million credits!"

Another commotion ran through the watching crowd. They never imagined a single mech in this festival could reach such a value. Even more remarkable was that the bidder came from the Mech Corps. People guessed whether he made his bid on behalf of a senior officer or a division.

Even Ves found the presence of the soldier to be puzzling. Did someone in the Mech Corps decide to do him a favor? He couldn't imagine any other reason why they wanted to get their hands on an outdated mech.

"Favor or not, at least a mental barrier is broken now."

With this bid, the Marcus Aurelius matched the asking price for the Caesar Augustus Eternal Edition. Any further bids represented a strong desire to own its first copy.

"81 million."

85 million."

"85.1 million."

"86 million."

Only four bidders remained at this stage. The military officer competed against what looked like a collector, a CEO and an anonymous bidder. It all came down to nerve and the size of their wallets at this point.

"88 million."

"90 million."

"90.1 million."

"90.2 million."

"90.5 million."

"90.6 million."

For some reason, the final bid stalled at this amount. Antje waited for a dozen seconds, but the crowd remained as still as a graveyard. Eventually, she had to move the auction along.

"Alright folks, the current bid stands at 90.6 million credits. Going once..."

Not even a peep emerged from the frozen audience.

"Going twice..."

Just when Ves thought the limit had been reached, the man that looked like a CEO lost his patience. "110 million! This is my final offer!"

The vast sum came as a shock. Even Ves hadn't imagined such a massive bump in bids. While everyone blinked at the astonishing figure, Antje hurried the closing moments of the auction along.

"Going once, going twice..."

Ves thought Antje must be deliberately inducing haste to prompt the other hesitant bidders into action. Whatever her intentions, her gamble failed as no one showed any willingness to put up a higher bid.

"...Sold!"

The crowd erupted in hysterics as the Marcus Aurelius had been successfully nabbed by the businessman. The other bidders in contention had to throw in the towel when faced with such extravagance.

Ves didn't know whether the winner had been smart or foolish for raising the bar by an extra twenty million credits. Perhaps he thought that raising the sum by ten million credits provided too little shock.

The news traveled throughout the halls. More people started pouring in from elsewhere in order to catch a glimpse of a mech worth 110 million credits. While the main hall showed off many mechs that sold for more, it was still a milestone for the side halls.

As for the losers of the auction, they quietly approached his sales representatives and bought his stalled Caesar Augustus. Ves instantly achieved his daily quota of selling three of them a day. His face practically lit up in smiles when he heard the news.

Chapter 228: Hype

Ves remained in a jubilant mood throughout the night. Despite the shaky start, his customers finally bit the bullet and submitted an order for his mechs. While they merely represented a reservation of sorts that could be cancelled at any time, Ves didn't worry too much as long as he delivered the mechs quickly.

The most astonishing event that happened that day was when the Marcus Aurelius sold for 110 million credits at an auction. In the Bright Republic, any mech that sold for over 100 million credits had to possess something special. Usually, only expert pilots and other elites piloted such mechs.

What made this case special was that the Marcus Aurelius reached this standard by virtue of its rarity and its so-called 'intangible value'. That was a polite way of saying that many people thought the winner of the auction grossly overspent on a mech that should ordinarily be worth 60 million credits at most.

One local news portal published a critical article about the auction.

"Through theatrics and guile, Mr. Larkinson succeeded in pulling the wool over the eyes of his audience. With the Vintage Festival's hall manager complicit in his scams, this money-grubbing mech designer manipulated his buyers into spending twice the amount of money that they ought to. We are dearly concerned with the Vintage Festival's integrity for hosting Mr. Larkinson and granting him additional favors that honest mech designers could only dream about."

On the other hand, many other news portal put a positive spin on the events.

"Have you heard of the Living Mech Corporation? If you're shaking your head, you're not alone! Founded by the scion of the Larkinsons, a military dynasty, the company made a splash in Ansel yesterday by selling and auctioning their limited edition mechs at sky high prices. Our resident mech analyst predicts that Mr. Larkinson has achieved a profit margin of a hundred percent, which sits at the top range for mech designers at his level!"

"It is a mystery why the Marcus Aurelius reached a value of 110 million credits. Mr Brandstein, CEO and chairman of the Brandstein Asset Management, is known as a shrewd investor and has never made any catastrophic bets. What did Mr. Brandstein see in the mysterious Marcus Aurelius that made him want this exclusive model at all costs? No matter his intentions, his august patronage has lent some sorely needed credibility to Mr. Larkinson's mech startup."

Ves shook his head as he browsed the articles the next morning. The reporters spun grand tales out of very little facts. Their articles mainly contained speculation and opinions that served to accommodate the existing biases of their target audience.

"Any publicity is good publicity." Antje told him as she ate her breakfast at the hotel they stayed at. "While these news portals don't reach very far, they are

strongly rooted in Bentheim. The key to building up a brand in Bentheim is to lay down a distinctive track record. Stand out. Make a splash. Whatever you do, don't settle for mediocrity."

In other words, even if Ves screwed up, as long as he did so in a spectacular manner, he'd still be able to increase his name recognition. The amount of competitors in the Bentheim market reached such a ridiculous level that many average mech designers who designed normal, practical mechs never achieved success because nobody had heard of them and their boring designs.

It was easy to get lost in the crowd.

Once they arrived at his booth, they faced a difficult situation. Numerous buyers congregated around his sales representatives asking to purchase the Mark II and the Caesar Augustus. Normally, that would make Ves happy, but this time the number of buyers exceeded his daily quota.

"It's very important to handle this situation with care." Antje warned as she read through the waiting list of customers. "There are a lot of influential people on this list. How do you wish to proceed?"

Even though the situation looked great, the wrong decision could tip over the favorable balance that they managed to create.

Ves considered his options. "We could institute a first come first serve policy. Those who spent the effort on getting here the earliest have priority over those who come later. If we want to be really fair, we could also do a random draw of all the people who expressed interest in buying my products. We could even spread them out over the day so that no one will feel we've left them out."

"Those are fair options, but they're not the most optimal ones." His sales manager responded. "Right now, you're in the enviable position of being able to set your prices. Even at your current price levels, there is still room for growth."

That sounded logical, and in an ordinary situation he'd go for it. In economics, demand usually matched supply.

If demand exceeded supply, then the most appropriate response was to raise his prices until the cheapskates stopped demanding his products. Meanwhile, those with thicker wallets eagerly spent more for essentially the same products.

Still, Ves thought he had a good thing going on now. Pushing his buyers to the limit might cause a backlash that could see the momentum that had grown around his products fade.

"Let's keep the prices as they are." Ves decided. "My profit margins are hovering around a hundred percent already. That's extremely good for a newcomer in the mech industry. It's more important to consolidate our gains than to overreach our current market standing."

Antje looked disappointed, but she accepted his decision. As a marketer, she thought that Ves had lost an easy opportunity to earn some extra money. If they played their cards right, they could have earned twenty to thirty percent more.

To accommodate their potential customers, they decided to go for a random draw. Each hour, they held a lottery for the opportunity to purchase a single Mark II or Caesar Augustus. The announcement momentarily befuddled the crowd of buyers, but they stuck around anyway.

If they failed to win the first draw, they still had a chance in the second one, and so on. The arrangement slightly favored those who persisted the longest, though eventually luck formed the decisive factor.

"Another advantage of resorting to a random draw is that the winners will cherish their lucky opportunities." Antje noted as she saw the first lucky bastard jump into the air with joy. "That means the chance that they'll turn back on the transaction and demand a refund is a lot lower than if you raised your prices."

Throughout the second day, his booth became more of an exhibition than a store. Even more visitors arrived at Ansel today, causing the halls to be packed with people. Through word of mouth, his show models became one of the must-see attractions of the Vintage Festival.

The space in front of his booth became jam-packed with visitors. The hall manager sent additional security to his area to maintain order.

Ves found it amusing that people started to speculate on what made his designs so valuable. They entered a peculiar state where they sought for possible answers while staring at his show models. This made them more sensitive to the X-Factor the models radiated, causing them to come up with all sorts of wild reasons.

In any case, everyone pretty much agreed that his models possessed a certain gravitas that drew the eye. This was most obvious with the Caesar

Augustus Eternal Edition, but the Marcus Aurelius formed an especially puzzling mech.

People ascribed more value to the mystical mech because someone else already paid a fortune for it. Even if they couldn't sense its X-Factor, its mere perceived value had transformed it into a hot commodity that brought a lot of value to whoever got to own a copy.

That perception strengthened when the professional mech aficionados gave out favorable reviews of the Marcus Aurelius. Experiencing its X-Factor at close proximity and trying out its virtual version allowed them to get a taste of its special qualities.

They all used their own terms to describe their sensations.

"Larger than life."

"A mech with stature."

"A living legacy."

These authoritative statements fueled the anticipation surrounding the Marcus Aurelius. By the time they held the second auction, a famed collector finally managed to secure his bid at 120 million credits!

More and more people began to believe the Marcus Aurelius possessed a unique strength, especially if they tried it out in a simulation. The crowd started to demand he release the virtual model to the general public, but Ves refused to give in to the demand.

He wanted to maintain the aura of mystique around his most valuable model and maintain its exclusivity. The less people became exposed to the mech, the more they wanted to possess it. The limited amount of time allotted to simulations barely satisfied their cravings. In fact, it spurred them to an even greater frenzy.

On the third day, besides selling out his regular models, the third Marcus Aurelius had been won by an anonymous bidder for a modest sum of 115 million credits.

The lower sum compared to the day before represented that his model had reached its apex in terms of hype and perceived value. Even though demand for the Marcus Aurelius remained high, it reached a hard limit in terms of how far Ves could stretch out its value.

His suspicions born out when they held the final auction at the last day of the festival. With most of the guests attending the closing ceremony at the main

hall, the buzz around his show models had clearly reached a low point. The final bid given by another CEO only reached 113 million credits.

While this still represented an unimaginable sum of money, Ves had secretly hoped for more. He shook his head at his greed. "I've already won big at this event. There's no need to complain about missing out."

The daily sales chart proved his success. His booth had topped the sales chart in Hall 2. Surprisingly, a few mech designers over at Hall 1 did even better. They mostly consisted of AUMD alumni who catered to their home market. While their profit margins were drastically lower, they managed to sell hundreds of mechs, all of which added up to a frightening sum.

Antje tried to console Ves. "They're already players in the Bentheim market, and their mechs are much more reasonably priced. These are natural results from your diverging product strategies. You've been targeting the high-end consumers while they've been focusing on the middle segment of the market."

"I see. You're right. It's stupid to fuss about this issue. We haven't been competing directly against each other."

He always envisioned the LMC to take the high-end route. Instead of investing in production capacity, Ves would rather develop his skills and his products and develop a reputation for excellence.

After a wonderful period of doing business, they began to pack up their props and dismantle their booth. Ves sent the show models back to Marcella's storage yard to be inspected and brushed up. Even if they served their duty as show models, they were destined to fall into the hands of his first clients.

"Goodbye, my sweet mechs. I hope you enjoy your new homes."

At the end of the ride, Ves wasted a lot of time on paperwork. Technically, he hadn't sold any mech yet. He only received a number of orders that he had to fulfill before the customer transferred the promised sum.

Despite these technicalities, Ves still made out with a fortune. First, he sold forty Marc Antony Mark II Eternal Editions. With 40 million credits a pop, the total sum reached 1.6 billion credits.

Second, he twelve copies of the Caesar Augustus Eternal Edition for 80 million credits for a total of 960 million credits.

Finally, he auctioned out four exclusive copies of the Marcus Aurelius for a total of 458 million credits! Just four mechs earned him almost a billion credits alone!

Still, Ves had to throw in a lot of caveats that diminished his final earnings. First, Ves promised Marcella a ten percent cut out of his gross profits. That was ten percent less than their contract which Ves insisted on due to all the work he had put into this event. Even then, Ves would dearly miss that money.

Second, increased resource costs raised the production costs to a higher level than ever. Right now, the fabrication cost for a Mark II Eternal Edition evened out at 24 million credits, mostly due to the added premium materials included in its design.

The Caesar Augustus and Marcus Aurelius both cost around the same to produce at around 50 million credits, though the actual price fluctuated significantly from day to day. That meant that Ves might be able to pay only 49 million credits tomorrow, but 51 million credits the day after that.

Still, the general trend made it clear that Ves had to spend big in order to earn big.

Chapter 229 Delegate

Ves faced the daunting prospect of trying to fulfill 56 orders in perfect order. He not only had to arrange the logistics in a way that kept his production line running as much as possible, he also had to be personally involved in each step of the way.

All of his customers ordered the equivalent of gold label mechs. If Ves decided to be lazy and left the fabrication to his employees, then the mechs would never reach their full potential in the X-Factor.

Once his customers got their hands on the diminished products, they'd look at their mechs and wonder if Ves bamboozled them. As the actual product's qualities couldn't match the show models, they'd be justified in their outrage.

"I can't cut any corners with these orders." Ves murmured as he drew up a rough plan on how to fulfill the orders as fast as possible. "The amount of stuff I have to take into account is growing by the day. I should probably beef up my administrative workforce soon."

At the very least, Ves required someone to take care of the administrative side of things. He also needed a financial wizard to manage his growing pile of

cash. Relying too much on automated software to do his administration left him prone to overlooking too many things

After the Vintage Festival ended in a spectacular fashion, he immediately returned to the Barracuda with his followers and lifted off from Bentheim. He couldn't wait to return to his workshop and get his hands dirty.

Right now, time was of the essence. He had to fulfill his orders fast if he wanted to release an original design before the end of the year. While no one knew when the Vesians planned to invade the Republic, the pundits on the news portals all predict it wouldn't be too long. Both sides already started mobilizing some of their reserves.

In the meantime, the Mech Corps fought back against the rebels and the pirates preying on the shipping lines. The anti-piracy operations progressed decently as the Republic hunted down the smaller pirate outfits, though they failed to nail down their elusive leadership.

Closer to home, several famous divisions achieved great success at crippling the BLM's off-planet assets. Their influence in the greater Bentheim region shrank drastically as a result, leaving the separatists with too little assets to pose a threat on other planets.

Once the Barracuda arrived at Cloudy Curtain, Ves returned to his workshop under an even tighter guard.

Word of his success at the festival had spread to his home. While his stature and influence had grown, so did the risks. Sanyal-Ablin already informed him the amount of probes and hacking attempts on his workshop had increased by over a thousand percent!

His long-awaited help waited for him at the entrance to his workshop. "It's great to finally meet you! I'm Ves."

A stodgy man with greying hair clasped his hand in a strong grip. "Cyril Hockett, chief mech technician. Your grandfather offered me some new scenery, and I figured you could use the help."

"Your help is sorely needed. Right now, I've got a barebones operation going on. That was fine when I just started my business, but now I've got to fulfill a large quantity of orders."

Ves proceeded to explain the layout of his workshop. He introduced his incoming chief to his shiny new machines and explained their extensive capabilities. He also showed him around the storerooms and other areas to make sure where he could find what he needed.

When Cyril saw that Ves had no other workers in his workshop except for Carlos, he almost spat on the floor.

"This is a piss-poor workshop for a company that just received billions worth of credits in orders! When you've grown to the point where you aim to deliver more than fifty mechs in less than half a year, then you should stop thinking you can do everything by yourself. As far as I'm concerned, you should have started training up some mech technicians from the moment you incorporated your business."

"To be honest, the reason why I didn't hire any technicians sooner is because it's difficult to insure their loyalty." Ves sheepishly admitted. "If you've heard about the dangers I've been through, then you should know there's a very real threat of infiltration."

When his grandfather promised to send out a chief, Ves had briefly read his profile. Unlike some random technician he could hire off the street, Cyril had been orphan who lost his parents in one of the past Bright-Vesia Wars. He'd been picked up by the Larkinsons who took care of his upbringing so that he formed a strong loyalty to the family.

Many wealthy families engaged in such practices to form a cadre of loyal retainers. The lives of these men and women could have been much worse without the nurturing they received from their backers.

Due to his simple history and impeccable service, Ves trust Cyril almost as much as his father and grandfather.

His new chief already made some bold plans. "It's a little cramped here, but I like it. You've got some real quality equipment here. It's a shame you don't have enough hands to make full use of them. Let me take care of the hiring. I'll be sure to watch out if they're up to anything. With me around, they won't even get the chance to harm you."

Cyril's confidence provided some reassurance to Ves. He nodded at his chief and keyed him into the various systems that ran his workshop. In particular, Ves granted Cyril the authority to hire and train new personnel on his behalf. The chief didn't need to check in with Ves for every little decision he made.

Naturally, his security systems still kept track of everyone's movements. Ves occasionally skimmed the logs to make sure that Carlos hadn't been slacking off. He simply had some extra reading to do with Cyril's addition to his workforce.

"Delegate when you can." Cyril nodded approvingly. "The key to transitioning from a scrappy startup to an established company is to increase its scope but maintain control. You'll shackle your company if you insist on micromanaging every aspect. Focus on your strengths as a mech designer and leave all of the details to your underlings."

Cyril made some broad recommendations to his operations. Besides urging him to staff his administrative department, he also recommended moving his workshop within half a year.

"Why so soon?" Ves asked with a puzzled tone. "I don't expect I'll need to expand my workshop any further before I develop my first original design."

The chief shook his head. "That's a short-sighted perspective. With only a fixed set of orders to fulfill, right now is the best time to plan a relocation. If you haven't looked outside, your workshop is sitting at the edge of a suburban neighborhood. I'm fairly certain that the local zoning laws is prohibiting a further expansion of your workshop."

"Yes, but why is it necessary to move to an open area as fast as possible?"

"You need a bigger inventory! Not only for raw materials, but also for your products! Right now, you're shipping in materials and shipping out mechs with hardly any margin for error."

"I see. Until recently, I lacked the cash to worry about building up my inventory. Now I've got a large amount of mechs to deliver."

A larger inventory allowed his workshop to fabricate without interruption or delays. It also helped provide a buffer if war or piracy cut off the shipping lines between Bentheim and its major suppliers.

Cyril provided even more reasons to move. Ves could plan ahead and use a much more efficient layout of his work site with plenty of room for expansion. He could also consult Sanyal-Ablin on how to make his workshop safe and secure from the very start.

"Money can make a lot of people go crazy. It's unfortunate your recent sales have attracted so much scrutiny. You can expect a lot of important visitors to knock at your door in the next couple of days."

His words came true the next day. While Cyril went out to the local branch of the MTA to put up a recruiting notice, a familiar face turned up to his doorstep. Dietrich sat down on a sofa in his lounge with a serious expression.

He sighed. "I hate to be doing this, but my father insisted. You know how we've got your back, right? A lot of scum started snooping around our turf. We've been cleaning them up as soon as they show up, but it's tiresome work. You've become a big boy now under our protection. I even let you take advantage of my connections."

"I see." Ves said flatly. He already knew what Dietrich had in mind. "Nothing comes for free."

"Hah! Wouldn't it be nice to eat cloud rice every day! Sadly, you're right. You only get to enjoy something if you're willing to pay for it. That goes for both the trans-galactic corporations and the local liquor store where I've been buying my best drinks. Seeing as you're running a business yourself, it's time to pay your debts."

Before Ves made it big, Walter's Whalers treated him like kid. They indulged him to build up good relations and to insure they established a relationship before he rose up. Even if he never amounted to anything, it didn't cost the Whalers anything to make the effort.

Now they realized they were sitting on a gold mine. While they still wanted to be friends, they also wanted a piece of the very juicy pie that Ves had just brought back from Bentheim.

They negotiated for a couple of minutes. Unlike the domineering gangs in Bentheim, the Whalers presented reasonable demands to Ves and the LMC. They asked for a modest contribution of five percent of gross profits.

Ves expected worse, like a demand to cough up 500 million credits immediately.

"We're not stupid, you know?" Dietrich remarked when he noted that Ves doubted his words. "We run our own businesses, so of course we know a thing or two about liquidity. All those stories you've heard about the gangs in

Bentheim are exceptions rather than the norm. There's a whole bunch of chuckleheads in that cesspit who have more greed than sense. They rarely last very long."

In fact, the Whalers made a shrewd decision by betting on the future. Demanding a five percent cut in gross profits sounded small while the LMC remained in its beginning stages of its growth. Once it expanded to the point where it sold tens of thousands of mechs a year, that five percent accumulated into a frightening amount of money.

Despite being taken advantage of, Ves knew he couldn't refuse the offer. He nodded wordlessly, and after exchanging a bit of pleasantries, his guest left the workshop.

"At least I only have to start paying for the next fiscal year."

Ves set the fiscal year to the date he first embarked on his career as a mech designer, which came up very soon. Not only did he have to file for taxes for his earnings up to now, he also had to make another interest payment on the debt his father accrued.

"It's interesting what a difference a year can make."

A year ago, Ves faced an existential threat because he started penniless with 330 million credits in debt. This unimaginably huge sum loomed over him like mountain that threatened to collapse on his shoulders.

The debt still existed to this day, only this time Ves had grown into a giant. Before he knew it, he became capable of tipping over the mountain anytime he wanted. Only his reluctance to spend his cash before he finished investing in a couple more licenses withheld him from doing so.

An alarm interrupted his musings. Someone else arrived at his doorstep. When Ves went up to see who came, he met a familiar face from the Pioneers.

"Mr. Larkinson." Linden Royce tipped his hat to Ves. "Can I come in?"

"Certainly. Come right in." Ves replied after his security cleared him of any bugs and threats. "I'm sorry to say I didn't expect your presence, deputy director."

"Recent developments changed our outlook on your case. And it's director now. My superior has been reassigned. There's been a lot of shakeups at the Pioneers. Certain factions lost support while others rose with the tide."

"And I suppose I'm to blame."

Linden smiled at Ves, confirming the jest. The recent revival of the mech scene on Cloudy Curtain had benefited the Pioneers the most. They grew from a marginal position with little influence to a formidable source of opposition to the Greens and the White Doves.

No matter how much they disliked each other, they had to rely on each other in order to resist the status quo.

Chapter 230 Transition

Director Royce left with empty hands after a largely fruitless meeting with Ves.

Having seen their true face, Ves did not have a good impression of the Pioneers. Even in their brief but cordial conversation, Royce always assumed an air that Ves already belonged to their crowd.

While Ves favored a better business climate, that did not mean he wanted to step into the swamp of politics. In his eyes, the Pioneers were just as sleazy as the ruling coalition. He had no doubt that as soon as the winds turned against him, the Pioneers would be the first to abandon his side.

No matter what the director promised, Ves refused to entertain any entreaties for his support. Faced with a brick wall in terms of willingness to cooperate, Royce got the message and made himself scarce.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to keep him at arm's length?" Carlos asked as he entered the lounge.

"I'm in the business of selling mechs, not policy making. Frankly,

The only useful bit of information Ves got out of the conversation was when Royce explained the Republican Commissioner's lack of involvement.

"The Commissioner is an old man who's been pushed out of a cushy position at the capital. Right now, he's expected to hold the fort and keep his head down. He can ill afford a controversy on his hands, which will be sure to happen if he intervenes."

"So we're simply a place of exile for an outmaneuvered politician?"

"Don't forget what planet we are on." Royce emphasized. "To the Republic, Cloudy Curtain is one of Bentheim's bread basket. As long as it keep supplying cloud rice, they don't really care how developed our industries are."

At the very least, Ves and the Pioneers agreed that Cloudy Curtain deserved to be more than a farm planet. That was why Ves rejected closer ties. They largely worked towards the same goal already.

"Let's get back to business." Ves turned his attention back to the real matters at hand. "Our first shipment of raw materials have arrived, right?"

"Yup. Enough to build four comechs. You wanted to fabricate the Marcus Aurelius first, right? Don't you think it's better to start with the Caesar Augustus and gain some proficiency?"

He shook his head. "I already mastered its design and most of its nuances. At my level of proficiency, I won't gain anything new after fabricating sixteen copies of the Caesar Augustus. I'm more anxious about finishing the most important orders first. Those who paid the most should get priority over those who ordered our regular products."

Ves had plenty of reasons to hurry up with the Marcus Aurelius models. For one, a couple of mech portals obsessed over the Marcus Aurelius. Those who experienced the show model up close gave out glowing remarks. Those who heard about the auction from afar savaged the design for being grossly overpriced.

While the auction contract didn't include the option for buyers to cancel their orders, Ves didn't want them to regret their bids. Fulfilling their orders as soon as possible should alleviate the criticism he received because the model would become more accessible this way.

Besides, fulfilling these orders also netted him almost half a billion credits in gross revenue. That was easy money, especially since he only had to deliver three additional mechs besides the original show model.

For the upcoming batch of mechs, Ves gathered Carlos and Cyril who returned from the MTA.

"The Marcus Aurelius is a prestige design. The frames have to come out flawlessly from our workshop. I'm going for perfection this time. Speed is not an issue."

"Do you want to utilize both production lines at once?" His new chief suggested. "The old one can be used to fabricate the less important parts while the newer one can do the bulk of the armor and other delicate components."

"No. It's important to give the models the impression that they're handmade by me. Even the most unassuming bolt needs to be fabricated with the best machine we have. We'll stick to the new production line."

While Ves wanted to fulfill his orders quickly, the Marcus Aurelius demanded perfection. Even the tiniest flaws that the MTA didn't care about had to be eliminated from the start.

With their new stock of raw materials, they proceeded to fabricate the three models one at a time. The relatively measured pace of fabrication and assembly insured that Ves could maintain his concentration over long stretches of time. This empowered the finish product's X-Factor and insured they didn't suffer from any deficiencies.

It took nine days to complete the three mechs. Even if Ves wanted to take it slow, the fast and efficient Dortmund printer insured a brisk pace. Ves sent them off to the MTA for certification, upon which they'd be shipped to Bentheim on a high priority berth in the next convoy.

Even though Ves claimed that he already mastered the Caesar Augustus and its derivatives, they still learned many new tricks. Carlos and Cyril especially gained a lot from the experience, the former due to his lack of experience and the latter due to his unfamiliarity with the design.

They both provided essential assistance that saved a lot of time. When Ves moved on to fulfilling the orders for the Caesar Augustus Eternal Edition, they transitioned into a well-oiled machine that pumped out a frame every two days.

The workshop became a lot busier once Cyril recruited his first crop of mech technicians. He settled for ten bright young men and women who came from all over Cloudy Curtain.

The young technicians didn't possess impressive resumes, but Cyril recruited them anyway for their other qualities. Their relative youth and boundless optimism fit well in a young and growing company.

"Their qualifications aren't important. Anything can be trained so long as you put in the effort." Cyril remarked to Ves as he watched the technicians fumble around a practice project on the old production line. "What I'm really looking for are blank slates. It's essential for a workshop to be staffed by a core of true

believers. These local technicians can be shaped and molded to fit your needs."

Basically, Chief Cyril aimed to replicate the same methods that the Larkinsons used on him. It sounded a bit manipulative to brainwash the recruits from fresh, but this was standard practice from the factory floor to the military. At this stage, Ves didn't require an abundance of competent technicians to assist him in his work. It was better for the LMC to lay a good foundation.

Ves didn't even bother to learn their names. All of the young men and women pretty much considered Ves to be a god. After all, he managed to earn billions of credits in revenue in a single event.

The difference in status between Ves and the average person had widened to such an extent that it rivaled the vast distance between galaxies. Ves had truly ascended into the ranks of upper society.

In general, if Ves needed anything trivial done, he told Cyril or Carlos, who delegated the actual job to the closest technician at hand. Thus, a three-layer hierarchy came into being with Ves as the emperor and the mech technicians as the plebians.

For the most part, this kept Ves from being disturbed as he did his work. While Carlos didn't have much of a talent for leadership, the mech technicians loved him for being a relatable mech designer, never mind that he never actually designed a commercial mech.

In short, his workshop experienced remarkable changes that elevated it from a tiny mech boutique to a proper mech manufacturing site. The backlog of orders insured that the mech technicians witnessed first-hand how an actual mech came into being.

Once Cyril brushed up their fundamentals, they even became more involved with the fabrication of the mechs. By the time Ves finished his fifteenth and

last Caesar Augustus, their assistance sped up the fabrication process by at least twenty percent.

Ves sighed in relief once he fulfilled the most important set of orders. Having delivered all the premium models before their customers could back out of the transaction lifted a weight off his mind. "Now we're really going to pick up our speed. It's already more than a month and we still have over thirty mechs to go."

The advantage of leaving the Marc Antony Mark II Eternal Edition as last became evident at this stage. All ten mech technicians gained enough proficiency by now that they could be trusted to handle more important tasks. Along with the fact that the Mark II utilized uncompressed armor, Ves managed to fabricate a single frame in less than a day.

Another month went by as they maintained a rapid pace. Shipments flew in and out of his workshop almost daily as the workshop pumped out mech after mech. Even though Ves pushed the pace to the limit, he never exceeded it and risk losing control.

The constant, repetitive work sapped some of the excitement out of his mech technicians, but it also indoctrinated them fully into his company. Through constant nurturing by Carlos and Cyril, the workers became immersed in a workplace culture that emphasized initiative, cooperation and excellence.

"What about efficiency?" Cyril asked when Ves presented them with his outline for the kind of workplace culture that he wanted to foster. "Initiative and excellence sound good and all, but free-thinking mech technicians have a tendency to go off the beaten path and decide on inefficient methods."

"As long as my mechs retain their quality, I don't care. Efficiency is important, but don't forget that my aim has always been the high-end mech market. My profits margins are high enough that I don't have to be the best in the industry

in this area. It's more important to insure a constant flow of flawless mechs. They might even benefit from a touch of individuality."

In the meantime, many of his customers have already received his products. With the spread of his prestige mechs, Ves created another minor buzz in the mech scene.

Two different CEOs won the auctions for the highly exclusive Marcus Aurelius. As soon as they received the mechs and transferred the payments, they displayed them prominently in front of their company headquarters.

The locations turned into local sensations with the placement of the new mechs. The strong X-Factor radiating from the frames exerted a subtle but pervasive influence to anyone that visited the offices. Those who worked there from day-to-day slowly adopted different work patterns.

In particular, they lost some of their short-sightedness and showed more consideration to the future. Whether these changes benefited the companies in question, Ves wasn't sure, but their and stature had solidified the Marcus Aurelius as a remarkable design.

The more numerous Caesar Augustus Eternal Edition provoked a lot of comparisons with the original edition. A couple of mech portals borrowed access to the Eternal Edition and conducted an in-depth look on what Ves had done to make them so special.

They came away with a lot of puzzlement. For some reason, each mech overperformed in a single aspect, and they couldn't find a mechanical reason for this deviation. They also couldn't make head or tails of the auras, though they definitely basked in the sensation.

Among the norm with gold label mechs, Ves included one of Lucky's unique performance-enhancing gems in the cockpit. The mystical gems worked their magic silently as he stamped each of them with the Anonymizing Stamp. With

the promotion of the DarkSpear, Ves could easily afford the 100 DP it took to stamp each gem, though the numbers added up a bit.

With the addition of over a 100,000 DP, Ves had refrained from spending them until he finished his current set of orders. Even though he could benefit from improving his various Assembly Skills, he didn't strictly require any help. He'd rather save the points for more important Skills.

Almost every day, Ves turned on his Privacy Shield and explored the options provided by the System. As the time to design an original mech came within reach, he faced a difficult choice in his development strategy.

Should he widen or deepen his base of knowledge?