

### **Chapter 331 Ambitions**

Traveling to Bentheim took a lot less time and effort than trying to navigate towards the Glowing Planet.

A lone planet swinging through space without a star or anything else that could act as a lighthouse meant that ships had to be really close to make the final jump.

In contrast, the Bentheim system formed the largest lighthouse in this stretch of space. Even an outdated ship like the Happy Jelly could easily fix in its coordinates from the border of the Bright Republic.

The journey lasted six days in total. When the Mech Corps and many of the outfits that allied with the Republic arrived at the edge of the star system, everyone let out a relieved breath.

They had finally reached safe harbor.

Anything could happen in space. An unlikely chance still existed that an unknown group figured out their route and intercepted them midway by disturbing the local space along the route with a strong and intense gravitic field.

Just like how the passage of the Glowing Passage had pulled a trade convoy out of FTL, an artificial gravity field could achieve the same effects.

Nothing of the sort came to pass, which let many people put down their worries. Their ships and their harvests also enjoyed the protection of the Mech Corps within the System. Virtually every outfit accepted the same deal the Whalers had signed, so their cargo already belonged to the Republic.

A handful of ships refused to follow the vast majority of the ships towards the inner system. Instead, they jumped back into FTL as soon as their FTL drives finished cycling.

"The idiots. They're going to get ambushed a couple of light-years away I bet." Ves remarked to Melkor as he transferred to the Barracuda.

"They might have something up their sleeves. Those who are confident they can sell their payloads by themselves won't be taking the standard trade routes. Pirates will have a hard time trying to predict their routes."

Now that they arrived to safety, Ves parted ways with the Whalers. The Barracuda flew close to the Happy Jelly in order to receive the Stanislaw and a shuttle carrying the two Larkinsons.

During the previous campaign, the Mech Corps employed the Barracuda as a forward scout. They stationed the corvette in the surrounding star systems in order to keep tabs of any ships that used those planets as their stops.

The job didn't sound glamorous, but it had to be done. At least it put the Barracuda well out of the way of any battles. Nimble as she might be, she could not take a lot of hits.

Ves first entered Captain Silvestra's office. Besides listening to her report, he also wanted her input on something else.

"Captain, you and your crew have been exemplary employees to me so far. Considering the rapid growth of the LMC, your responsibilities will only increase in the future. Therefore, in addition to the hazard pay you're owed, I'm also setting aside a pot worth several million credits to be spent on training. I have plans, and I need a capable crew to run my ship."

The woman blinked. "That's very generous of you, sir. This is much more than what we are owed."

"Nonsense. I've already dragged the Barracuda into two perilous expeditions. I can't promise you there won't be another one in the future. Even if she's mainly used as a scout, it doesn't change the fact that I'm subjecting you to a lot of danger."

"Admittedly, this isn't what we've expected when we initially agreed to work with a mech designer." The Captain reluctantly said, though Ves faintly suspected she acted timid on purpose. "We started our careers in the civilian sector by entertaining men aboard yachts. At no point have we ever trained to serve in a war theater."

Ves extended his hand. "Hence the training. If you agree to keep working for me, I'll promise you and your women won't be earning a pittance in my service. While I considered doubling your salaries, I think it's better for all of us if you shore up your skills."

The captain wrapped her fingers on her desk. "I'll have to discuss it with the girls. Even if you haven't approached us with an offer, I was planning to suggest something myself. Not all of us are cut out for the battlefield."

"You won't be able to avoid a fight. The Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom is already in a state of war, they just haven't declared it yet. That battle between the two fleets..."

His memories of that day sometimes gave him nightmares. He became especially spooked when he recalled that strange time loop that came into being when a torpedo destroyed the transport carrying a dimensional smoother.

"It will take some time for us to consider our options. I'll have a final answer for you within a week."

"That's fine."

Once he finished his discussion with Silvestra, Ves left her office and entered the tiny observation room that served as a lounge. Melkor had thrown his body onto a sofa and currently stared at the stars shining from beyond the transparent panels covering the upper deck of the corvette.

"Melkor."

'Ves."

"There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

Melkor turned his head, facing Ves with his opaque blue visor. "What do you want to know?"

"When the Larkinsons sent you to serve as my bodyguard, did they give you additional instructions? For example, if I do anything that would severely harm their interests, are you obliged to do something about it?"

"Nothing of the sorts." Melkor firmly shrugged his head. "What do you think we are, the Gauge Dynasty? Raella and I have only been assigned to protect you and guard your life, something which is hard to do when you are constantly throwing yourself in reckless adventures by the way. As far as I'm concerned, you're the biggest danger to yourself."

"Thanks for the compliment. I think." Ves chuckled. "While I'm not sure whether you are pretending or not, I do want to say that I trust you regardless. You don't seem like a guy who'd stab me in the back."

His cousin smirked at him. "Are you sure about that?"

"I am. Even though you don't talk all that much, you never shed the impression that you're a man of honor."

"I'm not a knight mech pilot, you know."

"You're a perfect fit for a knight if you aren't so good at ranged combat."

"I take it you didn't come here to talk about my loyalties and mech inclinations. Spit it out. What do you really have in mind?"

"Alright, I have two priorities in mind, and they're kind of connected. As you might have heard, the LMC is doing really well now. The truth is that it's entered into an explosive growth phase. I'm expecting the company to earn well over 10 billion credits in the current fiscal year."

"That's some serious money!" Melkor replied with awe. "This is only the second year you began to do business, right? Are all mech designers so rich?"

"Of course not! I'm something of an outlier here. I'm really good at my job."

"Right."

Ves couldn't say he had the System to thank for his rapid growth. This allowed him to catch up and exceed his peers who studied in prestigious schools in second-rate states like the Friday Coalition.

If not for the System, Ves would have gone bankrupt almost immediately after receiving his father's indebted assets. While that wouldn't ruin his life, he'd be forced to toil as a factory supervisor or something instead of fulfilling his dream of designing mechs.

He unconsciously recalled the time he visited a museum on Moira's Paradise. The oceanic planet's museum featured an amusing exhibit of a mirror that purported to show the viewer of his reflection from another reality.

Ves came across himself as a loser.

He quickly shook his head. That dreadful future hadn't come to pass. Instead, he became a successful mech designer and businessman who earned more than ninety-nine percent of the rest of the Republic.

He truly belonged to the upper echelon of the Republic now that he helmed a multi-billion credit company. And this was just the start. His ambitions stretched much further, and to accomplish his plans, he needed reliable people at his side.

"Let me get to the point." Ves pulled his mind back to the present. "Currently, I've signed a contract with Sanyal-Ablin to provide security for my premises. They've done a decent job so far and they're also involved with designing and

constructing the LMC's new manufacturing complex. However, I can't take them along whenever I go out on another 'adventure' as you say. They don't offer those kinds of services. It's too risky, they say."

It also embroiled the supposedly neutral security company in a lot of political messes. Only mercenaries dared to accept these kinds of duties, and only at great cost. Even then, their trustworthiness would always be rather fluid.

"I'm looking to establish a personal force that works solely under my name. I want you to create one from scratch."

This time, Melkor became fully alert. He stopped relaxing against the sofa and immediately sat upright.

"Why are you setting up a personal force?" He asked with genuine puzzlement. "Doesn't it make more sense to slap together a company security force?"

The difference between the two was that one force worked for an individual and the other owed their loyalties to the entire company.

The Bright Republic treated the two very differently. A company security force often followed a strict regime and they always followed orders from a group of decision makers.

Mech pilots considered a career into company security forces to be a stable, low-risk track. While they didn't earn as much as mercenaries, at least they'd be able to live with their families all year round.

In contrast, the Republic often treated a personal security force as a group of thugs. To be fair, personal forces often ended up proving their bad reputations as they enforced their employer's private dealings.

And now, Ves just suggested that he had need of his own group of ruffians. This did not inspire a lot of confidence in Melkor.

"It's not what you think." Ves quickly added. "The reason why I want a personal force is because I'm planning to go on my own expeditions in the future. It's hard to compel a company security force to follow me into far-flung territories."

"That makes a lot of sense. But why are you so insistent on raising your own force?"

"Because I'm a big shot now. I should act like it. I'm tired of being left out of the loop. I've also had it with being treated like a footsoldier. Since I have all of this money, I figured why not invest in my own mechs and ships? I want to take back some control over my life. I don't want to be left at the whims of the mistakes that other people have made."

Ves already laid out a vision for his small but promising personal force. He'd put Captain Silvestra in charge of the ships and Melkor in charge of the mechs. With the two of them working together, Ves had a lot of faith they'd be able to whip a crew into shape.

"This is really big, Ves. I have to think about it. I never considered going down this route after I left the Mech Corps."

"Look, Melkor, I know you're reluctant right now, but think about my success so far. This is only my second year of operation. What heights do you think I'll be able to reach ten years from now? What about twenty years?"

Even Ves hardly dared to dream so big. By the time the next generation came into being, he'd almost certainly be a Journeyman Mech Designer.

The mech industry widely considered this stage as the first, formal start of a mech designer's career. Novices and Apprentices were still considered underage. The chances of someone getting stalled in these stages were extremely high.

Only those who reached the enviable height of Journeyman would finally be treated with consideration on par with an expert mech pilot.

This put Melkor to thought. Even if he didn't hold much hopes to advancing to expert mech pilot himself, working for a Journeyman would open up a lot of doors for him. Perhaps he'd even be able to borrow Ves' influence to help him in his breakthroughs.

Unlike Captain Silvestra, Melkor needed no further consideration. "I'll do it. You can count me in."

### Chapter 332 Personal Force

In the Age of Mechs, wealth meant nothing on its own. The ability to leverage your wealth mattered more, because anyone could take it away by force.

Many affluent people either formed their own fighting forces, or they joined an organization which already did. True safety lay in the power of the mech and the gun.

Troublemakers sought out easy targets. Those with an abundance of wealth but not enough guards often parted with their assets rather quickly.

Ves had a number of groups to rely on. First, as the founder and CEO of the Living Mech Corporation, Ves enjoyed a significant amount of protection from Sanyal-Ablin Security Services.

Their contract primarily tasked them with escorting Ves as he travelled within secure Republican space. They also guarded the LMC's fixed assets such as the old workshop and the newer manufacturing complex under construction.

While Ves had an amiable relationship with Sanyal-Ablin, he never trusted them quite completely.

"Even if SASS is a security company known for their neutrality, they're still a subsidiary of the Konsu Clan of the Coalition."

If Ves ever fell out with the Konsu Clan, then the consequences for the LMC would be dire. It would be better for Ves to fold the company entirely.

SASS also worked primarily for the company and not to Ves as a person. While he could still ask for their assistance in company-related matters, they wouldn't oblige him if he wanted to go on a personal errand. Security companies firmly drew a line between security activities and mercenary activities.

The only way to bolster his personal power was to raise his own force, which declared their loyalty to him and him alone.

While he could also employ a mercenary corps, he'd never be able to insure their loyalties. It was the easy way out. Hiring a reputable mercenary corps saved him a lot of trouble, but the expenses added up the longer the contract lasted.

Their main use was to fill a hole in your lineup and to take care of some short and medium-term tasks. Anyone who relied on mercenary corps as their primary line of defense was woefully naive.

Many people these days dreamt of piloting mechs. If they lacked the required neural aptitude, then they dreamt of being able to own or command a group of mechs.

Right now, he had the will, funds and talent necessary to make this dream into a reality. With Melkor and Captain Silvestra at the helm of his mechs and ships respectively, Ves hoped to establish a small but capable personal force within the next six months.

"We're already in an unofficial state of war. With everything the Mech Legion is capable of, it's never too soon to raise my own force."

Ordinarily, he'd have to file for a lot of permits and licenses to do so. This might hinder ordinary people, but with his current status, Ves did not expect the government to put up any significant roadblocks.

This was also the time where his favored status with the government made itself useful. This status allowed him to skip a lot of red tape and expedite the registration process of his own force. He easily filled in a couple of forms on the galactic to get the ball rolling.

He only stopped when the form asked for a name.

"It's gotta be something cool or professional."

Those who wanted to cultivate a lot of contacts and wished to enter the nexus of power went for professional names that incorporated words like Guardians, Knights or Defense Force.

Ves found those names to be bland and uninspiring. As a younger mech designer in the prime of his life, he could be forgiving if he used a more daring name for his personal force of mechs.

"It's not like I want to hobnob with all the politicians and business magnates. I'm not cut out for social influencing."

If he wanted to gain someone's favor, he'd send someone else make connections on his behalf. What Ves should be focusing on was designing mechs or doing stuff that improved his ability to design mechs. Anything else formed a distraction to him on his ambition to reach the pinnacle of mech design.

"A mech designer's personal force reflects his ideals on how his mechs should be used. It serves as an example to be admired and emulated by my customers."

As such, the name should incorporate an aspirational aspect. Much like how ancient humans invented mythical characters such as Heracles or and let themselves be inspired by them, so did Ves had to come up with his own myth.

"This sounds kind of familiar."

He already possessed a fair amount of experience with coming up with myths to blow some life into his images. The X-Factor drew its strength from the imaginary realm, so Ves always came up with vivid ideas to empower his mechs.

"Forming my own force is similar to designing a mech. It starts with a vision. The name will fall into place once I have a solid idea on what my force should be doing."

He wanted his own personal force of mechs and ships in order to enable him to form his own expeditions. He had to admit he had taken a liking for adventure. As long as the rewards sounded attractive enough, he was not afraid of taking risks.

Through his adventures, he also wanted to see his designs at work. His personal force should employ as much of his designs as possible. He wanted his mech pilots to showcase the potential of his mechs under the most difficult circumstances.

After all, much of the current momentum for the sales of his Blackbeak came from the model's excellent performance on the Glowing Planet.

"Even with all of the hype and marketing, real examples remain the best driver for sales."

He didn't want to spend too much time on forming a name. He picked his mind for possibilities and settled for one that sounded the coolest without going too far on the tacky side.

Ves chose to go for a name that reflected his design philosophy. He already did so for the LMC, and as his force would ideally be composed around his company's models, the two should definitely share a common bond.

He decided upon a name. "The Avatars of Myth."

The name referred to his aspiration that his mech pilots could connect with the images attached to their mechs and commune with each other. In the most ideal case, his mech pilots became embodiments of myths and heroes that previously only existed within his mind.

"Thus, they are never fighting alone in their mechs."

After he entered the extravagant-sounding name, Ves quickly finished the rest of the forms. Now the government had to go over his application and provide the necessary permits. The next step happened after that.

"For now, I need to go back to business."

The Barracuda flew ahead of the main fleet. With her tiny cargo space, she carried no cargo at all other than the Stanislaw. This posed no risks to the ship, so Ves ordered Captain Silvestra to deliver him to Bentheim as fast as possible.

Once the ship touched down on the planet, Ves took an armored shuttle from SASS to Marcella's office.

While the LMC opened up a branch on Bentheim, Ves knew no one who worked at that office, so he would rather consult a familiar friend.

Once the shuttle and its escorts arrived in front of the office, Ves entered the front doors, upon which a receptionist directed him directly to the elevator.

"Took you long enough to come back home." Marcella remarked as she swiveled her chair from the impressive view out the window. "A lot has happened while you were gone."

Ves nodded lightly as he took a seat across her desk. "I've heard."

"I suppose you want to talk about Vaun Industrial."

The mere mention of that name soured his mood. "Did you agree to extending a licensing contract to Vaun?"

"I did, after some persuasion." Marcella admitted as she took on a slightly regretful expression. "You have to know it makes a lot of business sense to supplement your company's inadequate production capacity. There is no shame in admitting that the LMC is in the early stages of its growth. Every mech manufacturer that rose up to become behemoths have started small as well."

Ves thought that Marcella understood his vision, but he was wrong. He closed his eyes and shook his head. "My designs are not commodities to be copied blindly. What do the reviews say about Vaun's products?"

"They're mechanically sound. They are quite a hit in the Ylvain Protectorate, you know."

"That's what you think, but in my eyes they are defective. They are missing a crucial ingredient that is characteristic in my products, and that is the human touch."

"Ves, craftsmanship is overrated. This is the Age of Mechs. The time where we need to commission a weapon from a blacksmith and expect a work of art is long past. I know that you want to do things in your own way, but if you want to be a successful businessman then you need to make some compromises."

"I don't believe that." Ves replied. "There is a definite demand for quality mechs, and no, I don't consider anything that comes out of Vaun Industrial to be of high quality. Many other mech manufacturers already pursue efficiency and standardization above all. My company doesn't have to follow suit."

As they argued back and forth, it became evident that Marcella would never see eye-to-eye with Ves. She always treated mechs as commodities. She merely pretended to appreciate them in order to woo her customers.

"Mechs are products in our line of business." She said with a tone of finality. "Your job isn't to change the galaxy or upend the entire mech industry. Your job is to serve the mech pilots that fight on our behalf."

"My ideals don't conflict with that demand."

"Well, you sure don't act like it. Just face it that you need Vaun's help to tide the LMC over. You can always reinvest the fees you've received from Vaun to expand your own production capacity."

"That's already in the roadmap. It's not as if I can spend my profits elsewhere at this time. I don't think I will need to divert a lot of money to design my next mech."

Marcella's eyes shone. "So are you finally ready to design your next mech?"

"I am. I've seen a lot of things on the Glowing Planet. I've got a number of designs in mind. Right now, I'm thinking about designing a rifleman mech."

"That's great news!" The mech broker enthusiastically supported the idea.

"Although they're not easy to design, rifleman mechs occupy the largest share of the mech market. It's about time you take a slice of that pie."

In truth, Ves did not choose to design a rifleman mech because he wanted to increase his sales. The LMC already had their hands full with the Blackbeak and it would take months for demand to peak and decline. Unless the LMC quickly added new production lines, their production capacity remained at full capacity for the foreseeable time.

Instead, Ves wanted to design a mech for Melkor. If his cousin were to lead the Avatars of Myth, then he needed to pilot a mech worthy of his future stature.

The Stanislaw supplied by the Larkinson Estate was more of a workhorse mech than something that evoked prestige. It made for a fairly poor symbol and impressed nobody if they glanced at it. Rifleman mechs like these were a dime in a dozen.

"Since I'm planning to design a rifleman mech, what can you tell me about the type, and what does the market want?"

Even though he formed a vague idea of his next design, it didn't hurt to hear from an expert in the business.

#### Chapter 333 Rifleman Mechs

"Ah, rifleman mechs. I can tell you a lot about them." Marcella smiled as she leaned back on her comfortable chair. "Ranged mechs form the dominant types of mechs in this day and age. Do you know why that is so?"

"The advantages and tactical flexibility afforded by these weapons are too convenient. If not for the proliferation of heavily armored mechs that could close the gap and take them out up close, every mech would be a rifleman or a cannoneer."

Despite this caveat, rifleman mechs formed the core of today's mech doctrine. The rifleman mechs among a unit of mechs dictated their actions.

"Rifleman mechs work best at medium range. Since they explicitly wield external rifles, they have the flexibility to drop their weapons and take up a backup knife, although it's highly inadvisable for them to do so. It's best they take out their opponents before they close in. And unless they are built to snipe, they aren't able to take out distant opponents."

At that range, it would be easy for the target to hide behind cover or dodge incoming shots. Ves tapped the desk with his fingers as he summed up his thoughts.

"Rifleman mechs can be divided into two general categories. You have the run-and-gunners that are meant to fight and shoot on the move, and you have the marksman types that fire their weapons behind cover."

"A fair amount of people in the mech industry believe that's a false dichotomy. Rifleman mechs are vulnerable up close, so the best and most reliable way to fend off any melee mechs is if you can run and remain out of reach of any approaching mechs. Also, it is not as if these high-mobility mechs can remain stationary and use any existing cover to their advantage."

"I don't believe a mech can excel at both, and neither do I believe that a slow and sluggish rifleman mech is automatically a bad design."

He once designed the 2-star Old Soul rifleman virtual mech, which became a cult classic among the local gaming community. The Old Soul's rifle only possessed enough heat capacity to unleash a couple of shots, but all of them landed with a lot of power. Combined with its moderate stealth features, it functioned well in its niche as an ambush predator.

Still, the Old Soul never caught on outside of Cloudy Curtain due to its extreme design choices.

The way Ves intended the mech to be used diverged too wildly from what everyone else thought rifleman mechs should be capable of. Even though Ves had developed a love for this type of mech, it did not fit with what Melkor and the market demanded.

He could only give up on developing a real and modern version of the Old Soul.

Marcella collected some reports from her terminal and transferred them to his comm. "Read these when you have the time. They contain all of the recent sales charts and market trends for rifleman mechs. Right now, ballistic rifleman mechs are surging in sales."

The second way to distinguish rifleman mechs was to look at their weapon types. In the Bright Republic, rifleman mechs either wielded lasers or ballistic rifles. Both of them took an equal share of the market.

Some rifleman mechs possessed optimizations to wield either types without penalty. However, this typically resulted in slightly lower overall performance while costing drastically more, so most of the times, only elite mechs might come with this feature.

"That's odd." Ves rubbed his chin. "The next generation of mechs will be the golden age of lasers. Won't these outfits be better served if they can hire and train their laser specialists?"

"These forces don't have the luxury to dream about their future. They have to secure their present first. Right now, mechs that incorporate laser-resistant armor plating are selling like hot cakes. Your Blackbeak is among their number. Can you tell me why you chose to go for the Veltrex armor system?"

"That's because I'm trying to future proof my design. The Blackbeak won't be too much out of date once the new generation of mechs arrive."

Marcella pointed a finger at him. "Well, you're not the only mech designer who thinks so. Every recent design is future-proofed against laser that it's quite a challenge to find a new design that's geared against withstanding kinetic and explosive damage."

Now he understood her point. "I see now. There's such a slant on laser-resistant mechs that ballistic rifleman mechs must be having their greatest time."

"If you aren't concerned with designing a mech for long-term viability, it's a good idea to design a mech that specializes in ballistic rifles."

Ves firmly shook his head. "I can't do that for the moment. One of the reasons why I'm designing a rifleman mech is because I want to design the perfect machine for one of my relatives. He pilots a laser rifleman mech."

"I see. So you are doing it for another Larkinson."

"I do have a friend who's a decent shot with a ballistic rifle, but he pilots aerial mechs, and that's not something I've got a lot of confidence in designing at this moment."

Dietrich's Harrier was in bad shape, and while it could be repaired, it would never return to its prime. Ves would be more than happy to gift him with a mech of his own design, but the technical challenges of tackling this advanced scared him off.

Even though one of his earliest virtual designs also consisted of a ballistic rifle-wielding aerial mech, the Seraphim was based on a four-hundred year old primitive Fantasia 2R design.

Aerial Mechs had come a long way since then. The vastly increased complexity of a currentgen aerial mech was not something that a dabbler of the arts could dip their toes in. Ves first had to learn to crawl before he could learn to walk.

"Maybe it's easier if you laid out your vision. What kind of rifleman mech are you aiming to design?"

What kind, indeed. "I admit I don't have a solid vision as of yet. I'm still figuring things out. For now, I've only set a couple of parameters. It's going to be landbound, so no fancy flight systems with all the complexity associated with it. It also has to be mediumweight but it should be fairly fast and agile. Finally, it should come with compressed armor."

That final portion raised Marcella's interest. "That's going to be fairly controversial, depending on your price point. If you are aiming for the same price tag as your Blackbeak models, then it's only barely acceptable."

"I know. It's not quite cost effective to clad ranged mechs with expensive armor when they hardly form a hindrance due to their lack of thickness. Still, even a thin layer adds a lot to a rifleman mech's survivability. I think the tradeoff is worth it even if the dominant market trend advises against such a design choice."

"So long as you are aware." She said. Marcella didn't seem very eager to argue the point even if she knew it didn't entirely make sense in the current market. "Just be aware that the private market is used to spending up to 40 million credits for a premium rifleman mech at most. You can't charge the same exorbitant prices you charge for your knight models because your buyers already know it costs a lot to add all of that armor."

"I'm not looking to design a mech that conforms to the market. This is a mech that I want my relative to excel in. As long as I succeed and design a good enough rifleman mech, I believe the market will be able to swallow a base price of 50 or 60 million credits."

"Good luck with that."

Ves sounded fairly ambitious when he made that boast, but he fully believed he was capable of reaching such a height. He possessed an abundant amount of Skills and saved up an enormous amount of DP to spend on additional Skills and Masteries.

He particularly looked forward to the latter.

Their discussion lasted for another half hour before he had to go. As Ves stood up and walked back to the elevator, he turned around and left some final parting words.

"About the decision to extend a licensing contract to Vaun, I'll forgive your complicity this once. Don't let me hear you lead the LMC astray again. As a shareholder, I know you are only acting on behalf of your own interests, but don't forget who owns the majority."

Ves turned away and disappeared in the elevator, leaving Marcella slightly perplexed.

Previously, if Ves spoke at her with that tone, she'd dismiss it out of hand. In her eyes, he was a kid after all. It was impossible to feel threatened by a toddler.

This time, Ves had changed.

It took a lot of guts to put a former mech pilot and war veteran like Marcella on guard. Ves somehow managed to make her pressured, if only slightly.

She grinned long after Ves had left her office. "Looks like the kid is growing up."

Ves had little else to do once he left Marcella's brokerage. He figured he could pay a visit at the LMC's branch office, but he had no involvement with what went on there. He remembered from his talks with Jake that the branch office primarily dealt with marketing and after-sales support.

"That's not something I can stick my head in at this time."

He returned to the Barracuda and proceeded to set course for Cloudy Curtain.

At this time, the grand return of the mass expedition to the Glowing Planet had riled up the entire Komodo Star Sector. The incredible harvest made a lot of other states jealous, especially the territories that the Glowing Planet had previously drifted past.

Many states were green with envy at the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom to occupy a majority of the early harvest of the Glowing Planet.

Prices of a number of exotics had already dropped a fair amount. Meanwhile, a large number of newly enriched outfits started placing mass orders for new mechs to replace their losses and bolster their numbers to reflect their newfound wealth.

This newfound surge came just in time for mech manufacturers who feared that the previous spike of sales had already run its course. This new and explosive surge in demand shifted Bentheim's mech industry into a newfound renaissance.

"Everyone is going crazy right now." Ves said to the egg that held Lucky. He stroked its solid bone-like surface with care. "How long are you going to take to level up? It's already more than a week."

Hopefully, Lucky wouldn't take months to finish his evolution. He needed his pet to stand guard when he finally used up his Transcendence Pill. Even though it was a little premature, Ves looked forward to increasing one of his mental attributes past 2.0.

Despite the excitement in the Bentheim System, the Barracuda effortlessly transitioned into FTL at one of Bentheim's Lagrange points. A brief journey later brought the corvette at the edge of his home.

A short time later, the Barracuda finally touched down at Cloudy Curtain's spaceport. Once he entered the armored shuttle, Ves ordered it to bring him to the upcoming manufacturing complex.

Once the shuttle and its escorts flew halfway around the rural planet, they eventually reached an expansive construction site.

A massive site had been cleared in the middle of a lightly forested plain. Picture-esque mountains surrounded the site in the distance, providing the location with an ample amount of peace and harmony underneath the planet's everpresent cloud cover.

Dozens of contractors from Bentheim worked together with the security and construction specialists of SASS to erect a majestic set of offices and fortifications aboveground. Naturally, bots of various shapes and sizes did all the heavy lifting.

This was merely the tip of the iceberg. Ves knew that a lot more bots and people excavated and reinforced the chambers dug underneath the soil. All of the actual production happened several kilometers below ground, more than enough to shield the vulnerable production equipment against incidental raids and bombardment.

"Still, it won't do any good if a giant tunneling machine like the Gregarious Wrath decides to knock on my doors."

There was a limit to everything. Ves believed that a tunneling machine the size of a capital ship should be rather unique. The Vesians wouldn't bother to deploy an equivalent war machine to mess up his production facilities.

Not with Bentheim next door.

### **Chapter 334 Breathtaking**

To think that he came so far. The expansive works covering a massive area in the middle of nowhere took away his breath. The great undertaking before him finally solidified the LMC's ascension from a small-time player into a serious medium-sized mech manufacturer.

"Even with billions of credits sloshing around in my bank accounts, it's only a bunch of numbers." Ves remarked to Melkor who accompanied him and acted as a guard. "Only by spending them can we make something of ourselves."

If Ves had been taken aback, then Melkor was practically speechless. It was as if he couldn't believe his cousin earned more money than the Larkinson Estate made in a decade.

Melkor couldn't be blamed. He spent a lot of time keeping an eye on his charge, and all he saw of Ves was holing up in his office all the time and coming up with a magical new design after a few months.

A design that became so successful that fueled an expansive manufacturing complex on a sleepy rural planet.

"How much does this all cost?" The mech pilot asked.

"Well, the plan started at half a billion credits, but this looks a lot more elaborate than that."

This must be another decision the board made in his absence. The changes hadn't affected the aboveground portion of the complex too much. It mainly featured more robust turrets and a few more beautifully designed office buildings. Construction bots also worked on planting an elegant courtyard in the center of the complex leading up to the entrance of the headquarters building.

They stepped on a floater platform and slowly hovered over the dirt and incomplete paths before they arrived at the headquarters building.

Ves looked up at the thirty-story tall building. The building had been completed early on, and looked empty but clean from the outside. The structure looked decorative, but hid a lot of defenses underneath its wide-windowed and white-walled facade.

When Ves commissioned the original plans to build a manufacturing complex, he wanted the architects to design a headquarters that reflected the company's values. It had to look in a way that inspired his employees to value mechs and treat them like assets at the very least.

The architects clearly succeeded. As he passed through the tall double doors that loomed like gates, he entered an expansive atrium lighted from above.

The colorful screens on the roof filtered the gloomy grey clouds in a subtle gradation of lights.

Shortly after they entered, an older man arrived at the entrance. Jake Altern had finally tracked him down.

"Ves! You've returned!"

Ves walked back and met with Jake. "It takes more than a freaky planet to kill me."

"I heard you fought directly against the Vesians!"

"Hah, don't worry, Melkor took care of them in my stead. I had some close shaves, but we made it out okay."

They made some small talk as they exited the empty HQ. Jake showed genuine concern about his safety, and admonished him not to go harrying off anytime soon.

"The relations between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom has hit rock-bottom. The Battle of the Two Fleets caused both sides to suffer a significant amount of casualties. Both are eager to avenge their losses. A declaration of war is imminent."

"I know. I was in that very battle, though only in the outskirts."

He personally experienced the depth to which the two sides hated each other. The bad blood between the two states would never end until one side wiped out the other side.

After Ves assured Jake of his safety, the conversation took an unpleasant turn. Jake noted that Ves was still bottling up his resentment, so he took the initiative to come clean.

"Look Ves, about the licensing contract to Vaun, everyone from the Larkinson Estate was in favor of this move. Your grandfather had actually been the driving force of this decision. The Larkinsons are in need of money."

There was much for Ves to criticize. First, did his grandfather really demand this initiative, or had the old fogies from the steering committee pushed him to support this move? Second, why would the Larkinson Estate be lacking money? They'd gone by since the founding of the Republic without any hiccups.

Still, despite his many questions, Ves felt no need to hash it out with Jake. "I admit I'm very discontented about this partnership with Vaun. I made it very clear that Vaun is not a fit for the LMC. Their manufacturing methods are a disservice to a design like the Blackbeak."

Jake didn't understand what Ves was saying. To a businessman and administrator like him, all mechs were tools to be used and discarded at a whim.

"Ves, can you at least admit that the contract with Vaun has provided us with immediate short-term benefits? The licensing fees they are paying will easily be able to pay for the expansions the LMC desperately needs. We will be able to add two new production lines by the end of the fiscal year!"

Ves really couldn't stand to hear any further rationalizations. "You still crossed the line! This is my company, and my say matters the most. I can understand how much it hurts to miss all of those potential profits due to a lack of capacity, but you should have at least found another manufacturer that is similar to EME. Instead, the entire board and you treated my opinions with contempt and went ahead with Vaun anyway!"

He rarely got angry, but when he did, everyone took notice. Jake halted in his tracks but refused to admit any fault. "Disagree with me if you will, but I stand

by our decision. In your sudden absence, the LMC still needs direction. Every member of the board agrees it makes a lot of sense to go to bed with a professional and capable mech manufacturer. The results speak for themselves. We are richer than ever before!"

"That's the only reason why I haven't fired you!"

"Maybe you should!"

After some time, Ves calmed down. He didn't want to harp on this issue because the milk had already been spilled. Instead of continuing to ruin his relationship with his Chief Operating Officer, he'd rather move on and adjust the course of the LMC from this point onwards.

"Jake, you're a good administrator, but you're not irreplaceable. I asked the Larkinson Estate to send some capable people, and I can do it again if needed. Your only value in my eyes is to act as a caretaker of the business side of the LMC. It is not your job to come up with your own initiatives and act outside your boundaries."

"Understood." The man replied with resignation. Jake appeared man enough to shoulder the responsibility of his decision. "I suggest you remain within reach if you don't want something like this to happen again. It's easy to act like you're the boss, but decisions still have to be made even when you're absent."

"I'm not so sure I can follow your suggestion. When war breaks out, everything will change."

Both of them fell silent at the grim possibility. Even Melkor took notice. He'd been leaning to the side and stayed as inconspicuous as possible. All of the business talk hardly roused his interests.

The war was a different matter, however.

They smelled the gunpowder in the air. The first shots had already been fired. Now, they awaited the formal declaration of war which should be very imminent now. Once the Bright Republic entered war footing, many things would change.

"Can brief me on the changes the company will go through once the Republic is at war?"

Jake filled him in on the drastic changes the LMC would go through. "First and foremost, our ability to import materials will be somewhat curtailed. It's good that we are only producing a single model. Our resource needs aren't that elaborate or extensive, and we can source most of them from domestic suppliers. Prices will rise and quotas may be imposed, but other than that we can still do business."

"What about our sales? I've heard that the Republic will impose a lot of restrictions in this area."

"That's true." Jake nodded as they stepped on a lifter platform that brought them to a massive reinforced gate that led underground. "Depending on the level of war mobilization, we'll be obliged to follow every instruction sent government. Failure to comply comes with severe penalties. They can even confiscate our assets if we flout their authority."

That sounded very serious to Ves. The last thing he wanted was for the government to take away his life's work. "How often does that happen?"

"More often than you think, but it's always the smaller players who fall victim to this scheme. The ministry in charge of supervising mech manufacturers analyze their capabilities and issue work orders such as manufacturing a certain amount of replacement parts of a vital mech design from the Mech Corps."

"Do we get paid for it?"

"Just enough to cover our costs plus depreciation. It's not a profitable venture, but at least we won't be bankrupting ourselves. The only problem is that inflation and resource shortages can run out of control if the war swings against our favor."

Something like this had happened a few times throughout the Bright Republic's history. A lot of previously stable mech manufacturers went bankrupt once their business climate turned sour.

"What about conscription?"

"We don't expect too much of our employees to be conscripted. The Bright Republic doesn't care about the ordinary mech technicians either, but they'll definitely consider snapping up a talented mech designer."

"I'm aware of that. I hope the LMC can continue to operate in line with my interests once I'm gone. I don't want a repeat of what happened before."

"I can't make any promises on that, Ves. You should talk to your grandfather to set some ground rules."

Ves shook his head. "Let's not retread this conversation."

"Agreed."

"Back to the topic at hand, if war erupts, what kind of limits will we face for our sales?"

"We can still sell our mechs to private parties, but they have to be vouched by the government before we can deliver our mechs. If the customer in question is a loyal citizen of the Republic, then they won't face too many restrictions. Even gangs aren't exempt from this as long as they pledge to defend their territory against the Vesians."

Even though the Bright Republic maintained a love-hate relationship with the gangs that plagued their planets, they still recognized their use as an auxiliary force against the greater threat.

Different from the Republic, the Vesians ruled their territory with an iron fist. While this has led to a significant amount of economic stagnation, it also ensured that gangs had no chance of rooting themselves in the underworld of the Kingdom.

Some people argue that the nobles secretly fill in the void left by the gangs. In essence, the nobility simultaneously occupied the light and grey areas of Vesian society.

In any case, the gangs knew that the Vesians would wipe them out in time once they took control over a planet. This forced the gangs to flee or fight. Most chose the latter due to various reasons, chief among them was that they'd be exiled from the Republic if they shirked their moral duty.

"So how will this affect our earnings?" Ves asked.

"It can be volatile. On one hand, the mercenary corps that agreed to work for the Republic receive allowances in case they lose their mechs. Depending on their performance, they'll be shopping around a lot. On the other hand, not every mercenary corps is eager to perform errands in hostile territory. These cowards will try to flee the Republic in substantial numbers."

"So there's going to be fewer customers?"

"Correct, and those who remain will spend a little more."

Overall, that sounded like a net loss to the LMC. Even if the mercenary corps decided to stay and fight the good fight, they'll only get the equivalent of pocket money from the government.

That would be good enough to buy a couple of cheap frontline mechs, but it would take a lot more remuneration to buy an expensive Blackbeak.

"Which market segment will be the most active one, then?"

"If you're able to design a sub-20 million credit mech, then you're well-placed to take advantage of the surge in sales in this segment."

Unfortunately, Ves did not have the time. He first had to design his premium rifleman mech before he considered anything else. Arming Melkor with a quality mech was more important to him than trying to earn an extra buck from mercenaries that had fallen out of luck.

### **Chapter 335 Underground Complex**

Ves continued to pick Jake's brain as they entered through the gates and boarded an elevator. The device slowly brought Ves, Jake and Melkor and some guards down into the depths of the tunnel that the construction companies dug out only a couple of months ago.

"What about the Mech Corps?" Ves asked. "Occasionally, they license designs from external mech designers. They don't completely rely on models their research and development teams came up on their own."

"That's a complicated matter. Only exceptional designs fall under their consideration. As much as your Blackbeak has impressed the market, it is still a design that's below their consideration."

As much as Ves believed in his own design, he had to admit that his work paled in comparison to those designed by an entire team of professionals. A Senior Mech Designer helmed each design team under the employ of the Mech Corps.

Such a high number of capable mech designers would always be able to surpass the work of a single Apprentice Mech Designer.

He sighed. "I shouldn't get my hopes up then."

Ves was not so full of himself that he believed he could surpass the collective efforts of these all-star teams. Every member of a core design team boasted impressive track records. They made Michael Dumont look like the school dunce.

They mostly consisted of older mech designers as well. It was generally believed you had to be in your late thirties to be an asset to the team. This meant that the backbone almost always consisted of established Journeyman Mech Designers, each of whom possessed their own unique talents.

The elevator descended fairly quickly. Several kilometers passed by in a single minute, but the inertial dampeners built into the elevator ensured a smooth ride for every passenger.

It stopped once it reached the first underground floor. As they exited it, Ves beheld a huge but largely hollow corridor. Several huge alloy hatches led to other hollow chambers.

"This is the warehouse floor where the manufacturing complex will store the majority of their goods. It's placed in the upper-most floor to facilitate the movement of raw materials and end products."

Ves nodded at that. Some believed that the goods should be stored in the lowest floor, but Ves thought this made more sense. It would take a lot of hassle to ship the goods several more kilometers underground.

Once they looked around the empty chambers for a while, Jake led Ves to the floors underneath. Each single floor had been separated by many stretches of soil in order to isolate each of them in case of an enemy breach. While this added to the cost, the extra safety was worth the added effort.

"I don't remember any of this in the original plan. How much extra will it cost to setup a secure underground complex?"

"The total cost has increased from 500 million credits to 1.5 billion credits. The extra money is mostly spent on extra space and strengthening the tunnels. Not everyone in the board agreed to the price increase, but your grandfather is adamant about turning your little fief into castle."

Again, his grandfather played a crucial role in enacting a change within his company. At least this time Ves agreed with the decision. The company sat on a growing pile of cash. They might as well invest some of it on their manufacturing complex, which would serve as their crown jewel and the seat of the LMC.

Ves reminded himself that he needed to have a good talk with his grandfather anyway.

Over the next couple of hours, Jake led him down the elevator and showed him the other underground floors that needed to be filled up with furnishings and equipment.

The floor underneath the warehouse housed the underground offices. Backup systems ensured that almost any data stored in the offices above would be copied down below. In the event the structures above the ground got bombed, the survivors could still pick up their work in the underground offices.

"This floor can easily accommodate thousands of office workers." Jake boasted. "For now, we won't be able to fill this office up to capacity if we're chased underground, but hopefully it will be a different story a couple of decades later."

The office floor did not contain anything of interest to Ves, so they moved to the next and most important floor.

"This is where the bulk of our manufacturing will take place. The halls are extra wide and deep, and each production line will be segregated in their own halls to prevent any unforeseen accidents from spilling over."

Ves looked at the empty halls and its alloy-plated walls. "All of that cladding doesn't look cheap."

"It isn't, but it's necessary to safeguard the production lines and prevent any vibrations and signals from propagating into the other halls. They're well worth their cost."

"I love the abundant amount of space. A single hall alone takes up more space than double my old workshop."

This would massively ease the fabrication process and ensure that materials could be delivered promptly without bumping into each other.

A special jumbo-sized cargo elevator directly connected the manufacturing floor with the warehouse floor above. It was large enough to transport two heavy mechs side by side.

"The cargo elevator is stable and robust, but its speed leaves something to be desired." Jake said sheepishly.

"That's okay. Instead of making lots of smaller trips, we'll just have to make do with a couple of larger hauls."

Once Ves had his fill of the manufacturing floor, they moved downwards yet again. This time they arrived at what Ves had intended to be his private holy land.

"I'm sure you don't need a description of this floor. It's much smaller than the floors above because only a handful of people will ever make use of the facilities here."

They arrived at the lab and workshop floor. This would be the place where Ves produced his future designs. Even though he didn't necessarily need a lot of space and toys to form a new design, it always helped to have more tools

at hand. He shouldn't rely completely on the Mech Designer System to do his design work.

Ves planned to fill half of the rooms with some basic lab and workshop equipment. This alone would cost at least 100 million credits, but both the LMC and Ves wouldn't lose any sleep on such a trivial amount of spending.

The costs only ramped up hard when Ves filled up the other half of the space. Ves had composed a very extravagant shopping list that would cost several billions credits to obtain. This was because the best equipment could only be imported from the Firday Coalition.

Even though the lab and workshop floor took the least amount of space, it featured some of the highest level of defenses. Only the final floor below featured even more extensive security features.

"Let's stop by the last floor before we go."

They had to enter a special, highly secure elevator to go down to the last floor. A massive alloy gate stood before their sights.

"This is the vault. As you can see, the front vault gates alone can withstand a typical mech squad for an entire day. The sheer amount of alloys incorporated in the construction makes it fairly troublesome to open it. Right now, many of the locks and security systems are not yet in place, so I won't be able to show you how it looks inside."

"That's a shame, but I've seen enough." Ves nodded. "Let's return to the old workshop. I have work to do."

Ves planned to utilize the vault to store anything of value that would have been stolen if he placed it on the warehouse floor. For now, he mainly planned to store any high-grade exotics and rare mechs that fell into his possession.

More than an hour later, Ves left the construction site and flew back to the outskirts of Freslin. Compared to the massive undertaking in the forest, his older workshop resembled a doll house. The two couldn't be more different.

Even if Ves was about to retire his old workshop, he would always remember it fondly. He started his business here, and produced his first mechs from these modest halls.

Change was inevitable. Ves and the LMC had to adjust with the times. A modest workshop couldn't keep up with the pace of their growth.

Once Ves arrived at his office, Gavin awaited him in front of the door. He flexed his feet up and down as he seemed anxious for some reason. The moment Ves came into view, he smiled like a glittering sun.

"Ves! I've been waiting for you for months! Do you know how agonizing it is to be without you?!"

"Haha, you don't need to be so happy. I don't swing that way."

The mood suddenly turned a little awkward. "Ahem, the reason why I'm here is because public is interested in you."

"Let's talk about it in my office." Ves said, and turned around to dismiss Melkor and the guards. "Come on in and take a seat."

Once they took their places, Gavin began to babble about the public's interest in Ves. "You're growing into a household name in Bentheim. Even the other major planets in the Republic such as Rittersberg has started to take note of you! You can't imagine how many news portals and publications have knocked on our doors with a request for an interview. You already missed the hottest period!"

Ves regretted missing out on these prime opportunities. Several prestigious publications at the level of the Rimward Star Herald had approached the LMC

for an interview or profile piece when the sales of the Blackbeak started to explode.

These opportunities disappeared after the publications found out that Ves took part in the Republic's expedition to the Glowing Planet. It was as if they expected that Ves would perish on the hostile, wartorn planet.

"Can we approach them for another chance?"

"That's not something we can do. They'll ignore us if we approach them on our own initiative. They can be petty like that, and some of the hype has died down by now."

Gavin offered him a list of publications that still showed some interest in him and his company. Most of them consisted of regional and planetary publications.

"I don't see any major names on this list."

Ves sounded disappointed.

"Even if they don't have a wide reach, it's still very useful to engage with the publications that are highly circulated in our target segments. For example, the Bright Republic edition of Mercenary Central is the premier news magazine for mercenaries. Many mercenary commanders avidly read their weekly issue or catch their daily broadcast."

Even Ves had heard a lot about the mercenary publication. "Mercenary Central is a fine choice. Let's add for consideration."

After that, Gavin suggested a couple of other publications. Ves rejected most of them because he didn't believe they would benefit his profile or boost his sales.

"Mech Mothers is one of the more widely circulated news portals in the Republic. It's widely aimed at the parents of mech pilots, and exert a significant influence on the mechs they pilot."

"No. I'm not going to engage with a bunch of parents, even if it's one of the most popular publications."

"Ah here, what about Junior-"

"No."

After rejecting a bunch of tangibly related publications, Gavin finally gave up. Besides an interview with Mercenary Central, Ves rejected every other option.

"Gavin, I don't have the time to grandstand in front of the public. A couple of interviews are enough to put my name in the public sphere. A mech designer should let his designs do most of the talking. My Blackbeak is doing excellently in that regard."

His publicist and assistant sighed in defeat. "Very well, boss. I'll take that under advisement. Do I have permission to allow your officers to be interviewed about the company? Many publications are happy if they can get a hold of your chief operating officer or chief financial officer. These are mostly the dry and boring ones that focus on business, of course."

"That should be okay as long as they keep their mouth shut on certain topics."

"That's great! You can send me a list of the things you don't want them to say, and I'll pass that on to Mr. Altern and Mrs. Mackarie."

Ves fobbed off most of the interviews because he only had a limited amount of time to design his rifleman mech. He wanted to devote his full attention to completing it in three months.

"I don't even know if I have that much time. The war will break out very soon."

## Chapter 336 War Footing

The war came sooner than Ves had thought.

The Vesia Kingdom formally declared war against the Bright Republic, and followed suit by making an offensive thrust at Halcyon Point.

"That's where Uncle Ark is stationed!"

One of the most illustrious Larkinsons in active duty, Colonel Ark Larkinson was one of the family's rare and precious expert pilots. Although he only experienced the tail end of the previous Bright-Vesia War, his hard work and lack of vices had steadily improved his skills until he broke through the threshold that had stumped so many of his fellow colleagues.

Rare for an expert, Ark had also been gifted with an administrative talent. With his dependable leadership and a reputation for fairness, Ark had also managed to climb the chain of command without losing his edge as an expert mech pilot.

Every member of the Larkinsons regarded Ark with pride. Whenever the public thought of the Larkinsons, they thought of Ark. Whenever the people thought of Ark, they thought of his family.

Many people considered Ark to be a star that would shine as brightly as his father Benjamin.

"Like father, like son."

"The other two expert pilots of the Larkinsons are senile. Only Ark is vigorous enough to have a hope at advancing to ace."

"Hah! Do you think it's easy to advance to an ace pilot? Besides their founding ancestor, none of them had ever gotten close to becoming an ace!"

"I wonder if we'll see the birth of any new experts among the Larkinsons. They pop up during every war so far."

Ark's overall excellence landed him an important posting as the base commander of Halcyon Point. This was one of the most central and strategic star systems along the border between the two states.

Even if the Vesians could easily bypass Halcyon Point and invade the other stars further into the Republic, the substantial amount of mech divisions stationed there could easily wreak havoc behind enemy lines.

The necessity of maintaining supply lines and the threat to their rear lines meant that Halcyon Point could not be left alone by the Vesians. Even as the Vesians sent out several smaller forces out to raid the surrounding star systems, they focused their main thrust on this stubborn nail that kept constraining their strategic offensive.

The Bright Republic had long known that the Vesians eyed the strategic star system. Both its placement and unique characteristics played a vital importance in keeping the surrounding territories in check.

In fact, the Mech Corps had already reinforced Halcyon's Point during the Glowing Planet campaign. The main reason why they didn't send out any further reinforcements to the Glowing Planet was because they had been deeply afraid that the Mech Legion would exploit the moment the Republic diverted their attention from their border defenses.

Due to the prevalence of observers in the star system, sporadic bits of news constantly leaked onto the galactic net. It was almost impossible to suppress the news and misinformation that emerged from the net.

So far, Ves found it difficult to distinguish between truth and lies.

"At least the overall trend isn't overwhelmingly in the favor of the Vesians."

As long as Halcyon Point stood strong, Ves did not have to worry about Ark. The expert pilot could take care of himself, and if worse came to worst, he could easily fight his way out of enemy lines.

What happened at the frontlines right now had galvanized the entire Republic. While the older folk greeted the war with grim resignation, much of the younger generation looked forward to doing their part to defend their homes.

Ves met with Jake in his office the next day. His COO informed him of an important event.

"The Ministry of Economic Affairs has gotten in touch with us. Right now, they don't expect us to fulfill any obligations, but the LMC has been put into notice. We should expect to be called up to facilitate the production of supplies, spare parts or even complete mechs any time now."

"This is bad news. We only have one mature production line. If the Ministry wants us to produce some of their war materiel, we'll be forced to halt our commercial ventures."

Exiting from the private market would have dire consequences for their market position. The LMC risked throwing away months of hard work.

Jake had a suggestion for that. "It's time we expand our production capacity. We have the funds to procure two or three more production lines."

"That's impossible unless you are looking at budget equipment!" Ves quickly replied. "I don't want to settle for subpar equipment. At minimum, the production line should cost around 3 billion credits."

At 3 billion credits, the combination of 3D printer, alloy compressor, chemical treatment machine and assembly system presented a fairly complete package. All four machines had to be good enough to shoulder the LMC's future production for the next twenty years.

Jake retrieved a data pad and handed it over to Ves. "I'm not suggesting such a thing. Considering our performance and our growth, I've been huddling with Primrose Mackarie on and off for some time. We've ultimately come up with two different financing plans."

"This is... leverage!"

The first plan amounted to borrowing lots of money. The LMC at this stage shone brightly, but it couldn't keep up with demand due to the bottleneck in production. Rather than wait until the company made enough profit to expand their production, why not move this decision forward and use other people's money to get the machines up and running now?

Naturally, taking a loan also meant exposing the company to further risks. If their sales slumped all of a sudden to the point where they couldn't meet the repayment terms, they risked losing whatever they put up as collateral, such as his highly valuable reconstructed Dortmund printer.

Although Ves possessed a natural aversion to loans, he understood that he might not have much choice if he wanted to stay ahead of the curve. The LMC desperately needed more production lines, but it would take too much time to accumulate the necessary cash.

"There is also another plan on that pad."

Ves briefly browsed the other document. "Selling my stock? Absolutely not!"

As a private company, outsiders found it difficult to place a value on the LMC. However, business analysts loved to speculate. Their estimates of the company's total worth had continually been adjusted upwards.

Last Ves had checked, the fortune tellers pinned the LMC to be worth around fifteen to thirty billion credits.

This was a huge amount. This was because it got a hold of a lot of expensive assets and licenses without incurring a huge amount of debt. The company also earned a lot of profits because its expenses were relatively modest if you left out depreciation.

The only factor that doused investor enthusiasm was that the company heavily relied on Ves. Once he stopped publishing successful designs, the LMC's would certainly collapse like a house of cards.

Overall, investors preferred to put their money in mech companies that employed a variety of mech designers. Even if one designer produced a flop, the other designers could pick up the slack.

Still, Ves hated parting with his shares. This was his company.

"I'll put the first suggestion up for discussion at the next board meeting. You're right that we have to expand our production quickly, but we have to be careful not to chew off more than we can handle."

Even if Ves didn't take out a loan, his company would still follow an upward trajectory. They'd miss a lot of opportunities if they took the cautious route.

Sometimes you needed to take the plunge. If he was okay with risking his life on expeditions, then he should not be too timid to allow the LMC to take some risks as well.

Jake agreed with that sentiment. "This is great news. I've also consulted with Chief Cyril and narrowed down a handful of choices for hardware to fill up our manufacturing floor. Take a look."

Ves browsed the third document on the pad. It contained a small list of different printers and other fabrication machines. He briefly ran over their specs and found them to be adequate, though they couldn't quite compare against his current setup.

"Their quality meets the standard, if only barely." He admitted. "These production lines should be equivalent to what EME is running, right?"

"That's correct. Your young friend Carlos has a deep understanding of their production lines when he acted as our liaison. It's a system that's similar to

ours and it works. Why come up with our own when there's already a practical setup before our eyes?"

"Well, there's a danger to blindly copying other people's setups. I'll take these models into further consideration."

Right now, Ves had little time to spare for these issues. Even if he found it necessary to expand the company's production, he could leave most of the work to his subordinates. As long as he held the final say, the situation wouldn't grow out of control.

Once Jake left his office, Ves sent the list of equipment back to his chief technician and ordered him to write up a report of what the best setup would be. "Since he picked out all of the models, he should surely know which ones fit the company best."

He handled some paperwork after that. The outbreak of war had changed the whole fabric of society in the Bright Republic. Some of the wartime provisions already came to being, which meant that the LMC had to change the way it operated to comply with the restrictions imposed on the company.

The last thing the Republic wanted to see was a domestic company inadvertently supplying the Vesians.

An important notice arrived in his comm. The government finally approved the establishment of the Avatars of Myth.

"That was fast!"

Ves had the sense some bureaucrat rubber-stamped his application once they recognized his name.

Him having a personal force was no different than the Larkinsons forming their own fighting force.

Even though the Avatars of Myth had officially come into being, the outfit didn't have any members as of yet. Ves rectified this situation by calling up Melkor to his office.

Once his cousin arrived, Ves showed him the approval notice.

"Avatars of Myth, huh?" Melkor mused, trying to sound out the name. "I hate to say it, but your naming sense could use some work, because it sounds as if we're all trying to compensate for something."

Both of them laughed a bit. In practice, the names hardly mattered as long as they remained recognizable. Outfits with sillier names constantly appeared every day, like the Freckled Ponies or the Barbeque Saints.

"In any case, now that we've passed the most important roadblock, I'd like to fill in our roster." Ves continued. "Let's start by gathering a cadre in a single basic squad of eight mechs."

"It's easy for you to say so, but without any mechs of our own, I don't believe we can appeal any mech pilots that are skilled."

The vast majority of mech designers didn't own a mech. Those that did often owned cheap rust buckets worth less than 10 million credits. Ves had no need to incorporate such garbage mechs in his ranks. He wanted to form a crack troop of loyal soldiers, not a motley crew of mercenaries in all but name.

"Two of the eight mechs will consist of gold label Blackbeaks. As I come up with new designs, the Avatars of Myth will have first pick. Right now, a premium rifleman mech design is on its way."

Melkor frowned at Ves. "How long will it take?"

"Around three months."

"That's too long. With the war breaking out, the mech pilots who are worth their pay are rapidly being snapped up by the Mech Corps or the other outfits. I'll have to move fast if I want to secure some talents."

"You have full authority to use whatever to entice these talents to the roster. Just make sure they're loyal."

"That is a given."

"As for the mechs, for now I'll release some funds for you to purchase some other mechs. I'm fine with filling out our roster with other designs as a temporary measure."

"What's my budget?"

"Don't spend more than 30 million credits for each mech."

"What?!"

Leaving out the two Blackbeaks that Ves would supply on his own, that meant that Melkor suddenly possessed the power to spend 180 million credits. The mech pilot could hardly get a grip on the dizzying amount of money.

He had never spent more than a couple of thousand credits at a time!

### **Chapter 337 Intensive Competition**

Ves hardly blinked when he allocated 180 million credits to Melkor. He used to be like his cousin.

Now, he easily spent millions of credits like he was drinking water. As his career progressed and his company grew, he set his sights beyond the Bright Republic.

Once his personal fortune and company funds both surpassed a billion credits, Ves stopped equivocating about his bank balances. He could obtain practically anything for sale in the Bright Republic.

This was also why he thoughtlessly delegated the matter of procuring new production equipment and mechs to his subordinates.

"Purchases of this level hardly excites me anymore. Even the selection of a new 3D printer worth several billion credits is a chore in my eyes."

Ves used to agonize over spending tens of thousands of credits, but in less than two years he grew to a height immeasurable to his previous self.

"This is progress. This is growth."

His wealth extended not only to his credit balance, but also to his other so-called currencies. Due to the strong momentum behind the Blackbeak, his Design Points broke through 200.000!

"I can't forget about my merits from the Clifford Society either."

He currently possessed around 300 merits, which was a handsome sum for a Knight of the Society. For now, he hung on to those merits until he needed to purchase something exclusive from the Coalition, such as a high-tech license or a supremely advanced production machine.

"I'm sitting on a lot of credits, DP and merits."

For now, Ves did not feel any sense of urgency to spend all of this wealth. Three major priorities occupied his mind right now.

"First, I have to come up with a rifleman mech design within three months."

"Second, I need to get the Avatars of Myth up and running."

"Third, I have to ingest my Transcendence Pill as soon as possible, preferably before the Mech Corps comes calling."

That last point proved to be the thorniest. According to the item's description, the pill could knock out Ves for up to 88 days. This was far too long!

"I can easily design another original mech in that time!"

Ves did not doubt the pill's abilities. Going under for three months or less in exchange for breaking the limits that humans back was a no brainer to everyone else.

"The problem with me is that I'm too indispensable."

After a long absence, the LMC required a steady presence. Ves intended to be present in his company as he worked to design a rifleman mech. Disappearing for several weeks or months again would destabilize the company again and erode everyone's loyalties.

Ves summed it up in a single sentence. "An absent boss is not worth putting forth your passion in your work."

Besides, Ves couldn't afford to go under unless Lucky finished his level-up process. His gem cat still hadn't roused himself from his egg. Occasionally, the bony egg emitted strange signals.

The first couple of times it happened, SASS thought that someone tried to spy on the old workshop. Once they traced it back to Lucky's Egg, Ves had been forced to move the egg to a makeshift vault. The signals his cat kept emitting constantly tripped the alarms.

"I really miss you, Lucky."

He hoped his cat finished his evolution soon. Until then, Ves did not dare have any designs on his pill.

Ves got back to work. Once he finished his paperwork for the day, he turned his thoughts to designing a rifleman mech.

"I can recycle most of the components used in the Blackbeak design, but I'll definitely have to supplement my licenses."

At the very least, he had to obtain licences for a laser rifle, a ranged targeting system and a collection of minor auxiliary components designed to boost the accuracy of a mech.

Ves considered spending merits to obtain premium versions of these licences, but he reconsidered after some time.

"The difference between laser rifles isn't so big."

Laser rifles formed the single most abundant category of mech arms. Practically every mech squad featured at least a single mech with a laser weapon. This ubiquity led to a lot of progress in the field of laser weaponry. Humanity had pretty much exhausted all of their latent potential. Making any further progress was excruciatingly hard.

The market only got to taste a big jump in performance once they reached the next generation of mechs. The top designers and weapon manufacturers in the galaxy had managed to overhaul the conventional design of laser weapons and increased their power by twenty percent across the board.

This was significant progress!

The comprehensiveness of the new design meant that not only first-class mechs wielding laser rifles worth as much as an entire planet got to benefit from the power boost. Much of the innovations being released at the next generation could also be applied to the lowliest mech-sized laser rifles.

Unfortunately, the Mech Corps kept the advancements to themselves and a handful of powerful developers for now. Ves had no way of getting his hands on a nextgen weapon design.

He would have to make do with currentgen offerings.

"An expensive laser rifle will drive up costs. If it's too advanced, then nobody on the field will be able to service such a weapon."

Ves had already familiarized himself with the mainstream second-class laser rifles developed by the Coalition for their own use. All of them took advantage of the properties of exotics abundant in Coalition space but scarce everywhere else.

In order to fabricate a second-class laser rifle, Ves had to get his hands on a reliable supply channel for these exotics.

Even though third-class laser rifles couldn't hold a candle to the power of second-class weapons, Ves still decided to go for a more basic weapon for this reason.

He spent a couple of hours browsing the MTA's catalog for interesting component licenses. He bookmarked a couple of laser rifles and other components for later.

Before he bought the licenses, he first had to set his vision and draw up a draft design. The components had to fit his vision, not the other way around.

In order to develop a perfect Vision, Ves prepared to enlighten himself with this archetype with two different methods.

The conventional method consisted of interviewing rifleman mech pilots. He planned to consult a number of people, including Melkor and any mech pilots he managed to rope into the Avatars of Myth.

The other method consisted of spending 40.000 DP on [Rifleman Mech Mastery I].

A chill ran through his body as Ves thought about acquiring another Mastery. For the span of a couple of days, the System would whisk his mind from his body and send it back in time and space and stuff it into someone else's body.

What would it be like to occupy another body alongside the original mind? Would Ves be able to come to an accord with the original occupant?

"I don't believe the System will lead me astray when I cough up 40.000 DP."

Still, Ves had to wait until Lucky came out of his shell before he cast his mind into the mind of another mech pilot. Last time, he didn't know a single thing about how the System conveyed a Mastery to this mind, but now he knew that his actual body would be comatose and in stasis for several days.

It was imperative that no one found out about his infirm condition during this time.

If the Avatars of Myth had been ready to go, then Ves could reluctantly hand over the responsibility of guarding his body to his group.

As of now, the Avatars didn't even have a second mech or mech pilot to its name. Melkor warned Ves that it would take at least a couple of weeks for him to interview possible candidates in Bentheim.

"I should go ask some people about their thoughts on laser rifleman mechs."

While Ves could call Melkor, he preferred to leave him to his duties for the time being. Instead, he left his office and stepped into the workshop hall.

Everything looked the same, though Ves could vaguely sense some differences. The bots organized the gear and supplies a little tidier, and the mech technicians no longer appeared so green. A palpable sense of duty radiated in the air as everyone worked around the primary production line.

"Chief Cyril!" Ves called as he approached the chief technician. "How's the workshop?"

The man grinned at Ves. "It's better than last time. As you can see, everything is shaping up."

The LMC continued to produce its silver label Blackbeaks in this workshop. Under the Cyril's solid leadership and Carlos' insights learned from EME, they

managed to optimize the fabrication process and cut down the time needed to assemble a model a little bit.

"That sounds impressive."

Compared to the hell he experienced with the Whalers, his own company followed the opposite trend. Soon enough, the LMC's technical workforce would be able to rival those from EME and other comparable mech manufacturers.

Ves was very thankful that the Larkinson Estate sent Cyril to his company.

"Anyway, the reason why I paid a visit is because I want to hear your perspective on laser rifleman mechs."

"Riflemen, huh? That's the most prevalent mech type out there." The chief took a deep breath and guided Ves away from the busy workshop floor. "So you're finally ready to dip your company into the business of selling these mechs?"

"I am."

"Follow me, then."

They arrived at Cyril's office. Once he closed the door, he turned to Ves. "Do you know how many rifleman mech models are for sale in the Republic?"

"Thousands?"

"Tens of thousands, maybe even a hundred-thousand. Even if most designs remain unsold, and the vast majority only sell a single digit's worth of mechs, it still means you're going to face the stiffest competition imaginable."

"I see. You're right about that." Ves frowned as he tried to recall all of the great designs in the market. "Offensive knights are rare, so my Blackbeak is easily able to squeeze its way into the market. I can't expect the same treatment for my next design."

This was a very major problem. The amount of competition surrounding laser rifleman mechs led to brutal struggles among mech designers. Many designers went bankrupt because they failed to offer anything compelling.

It was impossible to design a mech that surpassed the mainstream mech models sold by foreign trans-galactic corporations.

"The amount of thought and optimization that goes into rifleman mechs has reached an insane height. It's not even possible for a mech designer from the Friday Coalition to come up with a better design from the same materials, so you should better give up on that ambition."

Cyril basically told him that Ves couldn't compete against the mainstream models by designing a comprehensively better mech. It just couldn't be done.

"What about the domestic supply?"

"There's a substantial split between original designs and variants of mainstream designs. Right now, variants are more popular."

Ves had an inkling why this happened. "Let me guess. The mainstream models are a little too expensive or burdensome to produce, so mech designers develop a local variant made out of materials that are easier to source."

"That's exactly right. The single most important reason why mainstream models isn't monopolizing the entire mech market is that their design incorporates materials that can't easily be obtained in our star sector. Their designers are thousands of light-years away, and they have to design a mech that can accommodate as many star sectors as possible. Incompatibilities are inevitable."

"That's where the variant designers come in. They license the mainstream models and they put their local spin on them so they can be produced and sold by their own companies."

Ves had to admit that it sounded like a foolproof avenue for success. As long as a mech designer bought the right production licence, he would be able to sell an astounding amount of mechs in no time.

Cyril pointed his finger at Ves. "It's a good thing there aren't too many variant designers in the Republic. It's too expensive to licence a mainstream mech design. Every variant designer who currently owns such licenses obtained them through connections or special circumstances. Not a single one of them paid credits for their licenses. Even the government can't afford such extravagance."

Rumors floated around in the galactic net that the upfront cost of a single mainstream mech licence cost as much as 10,000 billion credits. And that was only for an older design!

How could Ves compete against variants derived from these ultra-expensive designs?

### Chapter 338 Exceptional

Lucky's glowing egg reached a critical stage. Its bone-like surface sparkled and glistened. The pale blue glowing lines burned bright as the energies within spiked alarmingly.

The spillover effects had reached such a volatile stage that SASS thought someone attacked the workshop. Ves had to call back the incoming security guards before they mistook Lucky's egg as a bomb.

"I'm busy with an experiment! Don't enter my office! I'll take all responsibility for this incident!"

With that answer, the guards reluctantly drew back, though they kept a vigilant eye on his office door.

Ves learned his lesson and deployed his Privacy Shield. No matter how many times the egg convulsed, not a wisp of it escaped the Privacy Shield's barrier.

The egg began to radiate an eerie green glow that pulsed like a heartbeat. Ves could feel the thrum deep within his bones. Even his internal energy cycle disrupted its quiet routine and started to follow the pulsing pattern.

All of this astounded Ves. His eyes opened wide as his sixth sense brushed against sensations that tasted a lot like raw emotion.

The pulses kept accelerating until it reached a fever pitch. Just when the egg looked like it was about to explode, everything stopped when a crack appeared on the shell.

A dainty bone-white paw emerged from the cracks.

The violent activity had stopped as if a bomb had been defused at the very last second. Lucky's paws continued to crack open the egg that now seemed very brittle. Moments later, Lucky's head emerged from the widened crack. His curious eyes looked around until they centered around Ves.

"Meow!"

Lucky rapidly broke away from the shell and glided over to Ves as if he weighed nothing at all.

"Oof!"

Ves caught his cat in his arms and smiled at his pet. "You've finally leveled up!"

"Meow."

Despite the drastic procedure, Lucky looked the same as always. His exterior plating still consisted of a substance that resembled high-grade Rorach's Bone. This gave his cat an exotic appearance that couldn't help but draw people's eyes.

Fortunately, Lucky didn't glow anymore, so he wouldn't attract too much attention. Ves tried to spot any other changes but failed to see anything that stood out except for size.

Lucky had grown a little bigger. It was almost imperceptible, but Lucky did indeed grow a centimeter longer. This did not represent too much of a change, but it indicated that Lucky might grow into a tiger someday.

"I'd rather you stay small. You're easier to feed that way." Ves nuzzled Lucky's belly with his face, prompting his cat to paw at him. "Hahaha, I'll have to enjoy this while I can!"

"Meow meow!"

Once he finishing cuddling his cat, he set Lucky down and inspected him with the vision granted by the System.

[Pet Status]

Name: Lucky

Owner: Ves Larkinson

Rank: Exceptional [Exclusive]

Level: 3

Skills

[Gem Excretion III]

[Energy Claws II]

[Gravity Manipulation I]

[Regeneration I]

[Sharp Senses I]

[Spirituality I]

Overall, Lucky's evolution resulted in a substantial boost of strength. Ves had no doubt that Lucky became more durable and his energy reserves grew deeper. Even if the System didn't enumerate his exact specs, Ves already knew what to expect from the first time he leveled up.

What was different was that Lucky's rank jumped from Gold to Exceptional. This obviously indicated that Lucky had become a more advanced mechanical pet. This also reflected in the Skills that had been added to his status page.

Ves briefly went over the skills. Gem Excretion III spoke for itself. This was Lucky's foundational skill, and one that had the potential of bringing a lot of value to Ves. The jump from Gem Excretion II to Gem Excretion III shouldn't be too substantial. Every gem that Lucky left in litter box only boosted a mech's performance by a couple of percentages.

As long as Lucky kept leveling up, his gems would grow more formidable. At some point, Ves would be able to harvest gems that boosted an attribute by as much as twenty percent!

The power of Lucky's gems should truly come into being by then!

Lucky's Energy Claws II also leveled up. While Ves had no clue what had changed, they should be able to cut through even tougher materials or last a bit longer.

The remaining skills all appeared to be new. Ves tried to inspect them, but he found his borrowed power of observation to be limited. No matter how much he stared at those skills, the System refused to display a description of these novel additions.

"Oh, come on!"

Lucky's level up had put the cat at a higher pedestal. Ves suspected that he lagged behind. "Lucky advanced to level 3 while I'm still stuck as an Apprentice Mech Designer."

This put Ves to thought. The road to Journeyman was a difficult one. The most basic prerequisite had to do with his Skills. The easiest and most direct way to satisfy this condition was to upgrade a Skill to Senior-level.

"Apprentices rarely manage to reach such heights. It's easier to accumulate a lot of Journeyman-level Skills than try to advance a single Skill to the minimum standard of a vaunted Senior."

Still, what others might have difficulties with, to Ves it was a matter of spending Design Points.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 223,356

Attributes

Strength: 1.3

Dexterity: 0.8

Endurance: 1.9

Intelligence: 1.8

Creativity: 1.9

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

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

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice - [Knight Mech Mastery I]

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Journeyman - [Structural Pathway Configuration III] -  
[Energy Storage IV] - [Conductors III]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman

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

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression III]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

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

[Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization IV]

[Melee Weapon Optimization IV]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice

[Signals and Communications]: Journeyman

Abilities

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

Evaluation: A post-human mech designer with a random collection of Skills.

Ves accumulated so many Design Points over the past couple of months due to the proliferation of his Blackbeak Design. Both his virtual and physical mechs enjoyed commercial success.

He found it interesting that he earned as much DP from his physical mechs than from their virtual copies. It was the first time he had experienced such a thing.

The main reason for the Blackbeak's lack of popularity was that it couldn't deliver a powerful short-term performance. The Blackbeak's performance in the arena was rather dismal. It only redeemed itself in larger battles like the 50v50 Wartorn Instances.

Luckily, the people who bought physical mechs prized the Blackbeak's strengths in toughness and endurance. Sales had spiked during the peak of the Glowing Planet campaign and only tailed off after its conclusion.

According to the sales department's internal projections, demand for the bronze label Blackbeak would slowly decline as the limited demand for offensive knights continued to be met.

While this meant that EME would soon lose their cash cow, the LMC enjoyed a better market position.

"The market finally recognizes the efforts I've made into ensuring the quality of my products."

His gold label mechs enjoyed widespread renown. They had become veritable collector items. All of the limited edition mechs he sold at the Vintage Festival gained a substantial amount of value, the most expensive ones even straight-up doubling in value.

Even though the silver label Blackbeaks differed only minutely from their lesser bronze label counterparts, the mere fact that it carried the LMC's illustrious label had become an added benefit to his customers.

"This is exactly what I want."

Ves worked hard to associate his brand with quality and craftsmanship. He had to give up a lot of opportunities to earn a quick buck along the way, but the seeds had finally started to bear fruit.

His current goal should be to reinforce this association by publishing more designs with the same level of quality. Once the local market got used to his standards, Ves could then start with publishing more exotic designs without fearing any rejection.

"This will take a long time to ferment. First I have to prove that the Blackbeak isn't a fluke by designing a successful rifleman mech design."

Ves turned his attention back to the System and entered the Skills page. The projection shifted to an array of trees, all of which kept branching out like an endless river delta.

Considering that he aimed to design a rifleman mech, Ves focused on the fundamental Skills that played the biggest role.

"Both Mechanics and Physics are vitally important to rifleman mech designs."

Mechanics allowed Ves to design a wholesome frame that synergized with the pilot and his piloting style. The design of a rifleman mech required a wholly different application of Mechanics than with knights.

Knights favored brute force and robustness. Their frames must withstand a lot of shock and should continue to function even if it suffered moderate damage.

Rifleman mechs prioritized precision and finesse. Humanoid rifleman mechs should adhere closely to the human physique in order to maximize the transferability of a mech pilot's skill in marksmanship.

Battle Mechatronics applied to this as well, but Ves should first upgrade its parent Skills, hence why he eyed Mechanics first.

"I can also go with Physics."

Physics delved more into the science of how a mech's components and weapons worked. Whereas Mechanics dealt with mechs as a single system, Physics broke it down into its constituent components.

The largest benefit to upgrading Physics was that Ves would gain the qualification to tinker with mech-sized laser weapons. Even if he learned a fair bit about laser weapons by studying the forbidden research on gamma lasers, Ves still possessed a shallow foundation compared to those underground scientists who dedicated their lives to this field.

Upgrading his Physics Skill also enhanced his ability to optimize his designs. He would be able to program and utilize more complex mathematical models and adjust them on the fly based on his needs. He'd be able to gain some proficiency into some of the higher levels of Physics and make more inroads into understanding the effects of highly energetic exotics.

"I've got two good choices. Which one should I pick?"

Each choice emphasized different aspects of a mech. The safest choice would be to upgrade his Mechanics. A strong development required a strong foundation, and Ves couldn't think of anything that could beat Mechanics in terms of fundamentals.

Still, Ves did not lack for confidence in terms of Mechanics. Despite his lack of Sub-Skills in this category, Ves had developed his Mechanics Skill to a deeper level with the help of his Master and his own personal experiences.

He even dared to say that his Mechanics could keep up with actual Journeyman Mech Designers.

"Upgrading my Physics presents more practical benefits. First, the ability to modify a laser rifle is a powerful one. Second, my ability to optimize my designs will also improve."

Ves focused mostly on the former, but the latter also had a lot of value. Better optimization allowed him to close the gap against the dominant mainstream designs and their many variants.

The only downside to choosing Physics was that Ves might not be able to utilize its advantages with other mech types such as Skirmishers.

"I can always upgrade my Mechanics Skill later on. Right now Physics is more useful to me."

Upgrading a Skill to Senior-level entailed learning at least three Sub-Skills and completing an upgrade mission.

"This mission may take some time."

Ves was worried that the System would serve him another multi-month mission. He already had a lot of tasks on his plate.

After couple of seconds of hesitation, he decided to bite the bullet and dump 100,000 DP into upgrading his Physics to Senior-level.

A mission prompt appeared.

[Upgrade Mission]

Mission: Design and Fabricate a Functional Gamma Laser Rifle

Difficulty: C-Rank

Prerequisites: [Physics - Journeyman]

Description

The essence of a laser rifle revolves around converting energy into a form that causes damage to the target. Conventional laser weapons predominantly utilize the infrared portion of the electromagnetic spectrum.

However, a mech designer should not be content with remaining within the boundaries of artificial rules.

Explore the potential of laser weapons and design a gamma laser rifle by yourself. Then fabricate it and test the weapon to verify its performance.

Reward:

[Physics - Senior]

The upgrade mission sounded simple. The System only assigned a difficulty of C to this task and it didn't even come with a failure condition.

The only problem was that Ves could not let anyone find out what he was doing. Producing gamma laser weapons was as bad as dabbling with nuclear weapons!

"This is illegal!"

### Chapter 339 Fear of the Taboo

The seriousness in which the MTA and CFA enforced the laws on taboo weapons frightened all of human space. Practically no one except the lawless dared to cross the two biggest organizations that collectively guarded over humanity.

It was for their own protection. During the Age of Conquest, the humans who conquered the galaxy star by star possessed no bottom line. With their awesome capital ships, they showed no remorse in bombing highly populated alien planets to glass.

Saturating a planet with thousands of nuclear missiles proved to be the quickest, easiest and dirtiest method to wipe out an entire planet's worth of aliens.

Over time, humanity began to be more creative as they sometimes wished to occupy a planet instead of turning it into a lifeless radioactive rock. They experimented with biological diseases and chemicals as well as radiation as a way to cleanse a planet without rendering it uninhabitable.

The results were decidedly mixed, but that didn't lessen humanity's enthusiasm for these destructive toys.

At the tail end of the Age of Conquest, humanity ceased to expand outwards and started to focus inwards. Internal contradictions constantly flared up and the stagnant Terrans faced a revolt among their own ranks, which ultimately led to the birth of the New Rubarth Empire.

These intense and highly destructive wars mainly happened in space. Warships ruled the void. Sending out ground forces to invade a planet proved to be a laborious operation. Seizing control of a foreign planet's population and assets often cost too much time and effort.

The invaders found it more convenient if they rained down mass destruction and wipe out a quarter to half the planet's population.

Humanity began to turn their weapons of mass destruction to their own race.

The tragedies that ensued could not be counted even to this day. Too many atrocities happened in this period to keep track of. Once a state began flinging weapons of mass destruction against another state, the enmity that emerged between the two became irreconcilable.

"You hit me, I hit you back!"

The victims lashed out twice as hard and wiped out every inhabited planet they could reach. Historians had projected that humanity spread out over half the galaxy lost more than ten percent of its total population in a span of fifty years!

Ten percent might not sound so much, but this amounted to many trillions of wasted lives. The sheer amount of death and destruction changed the course of history and threatened to become a man-made plague.

It was easy to start a fight. It was impossible to stop it once the cycle of revenge began to revolve.

The emergence of the first mech piloted by the legendary Mack Liu ended it all. His emergence along with some other factors led to the formation of the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance.

The two organizations heralded the Age of Mechs. Their strength awed the fractious states and suppressed the unruly parties that wanted to keep using their weapons of mass destruction. Human space quickly found out that it was not a good idea to incur their wrath.

Two important changes happened at the start of the Age of Mechs besides the ban on weapons of mass destruction. First, CFA assumed sole responsibility for defending human space against the alien empires that pressured it from every direction.

They straightforwardly confiscated every warship and formed their own defense fleet crewed by a variety of humans across the galaxy. States lost the right to wage their internal wars with ships armed to the teeth with colossal weaponry. It was too expensive to replace the fallen ships, especially since each of them cost a substantial fortune.

Capital ships took up an extravagant amount of manpower and resources to produce. The destruction and loss of each major warship weakened humanity's ability to withstand alien incursions. Therefore, the CFA had been tasked with preserving these assets as much as possible.

The second change revolved around promoting the use of mechs as the main mode for war. No longer would capital ships be allowed to orbit a planet and bombard it into oblivion with huge cannons or destructive lasers.

The transition to mechs turned out to be very bumpy. Besides the immature technology that underpinned workings, states also found the mech to be a lackluster weapon platform. Compared to the destructive power of a capital ship, a single mech was an ant.

The MTA overthrew a lot of states before humanity learned their lesson.

Ves recalled the last couple of hundred years and sighed. "Right now, we live in the Age of Mechs."

There was no place for a forbidden weapon like a gamma laser rifle in today's society. Only the most depraved and degenerate pirates used such a thing, and they never lasted very long.

In truth, the destructiveness of gamma lasers or grasers couldn't quite compare against the might of a nuclear bomb. The weapon type worked best in space where it could only threaten spaceships or space station.

For various reasons, the MTA and CFA added any laser weapon that weaponized some of the higher frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum to the list of taboo weapons.

Ves had to accept their stance without question. What could he do on his own? Should he visit the MTA's branch on Cloudy Curtain and ask for an exception to create a weapon of mass destruction because of a mission?

"They'll shoot me to pieces before I can even get another word in." Ves shook his head. "That is if they don't capture me and torture me to death."

This thorny upgrade mission compelled Ves to work alone. He absolutely could not trust a single person except for Lucky. Even his most trusted technicians such as Carlos or Chief Cyril would turn on him in a heartbeat if he showed any interest at all in producing a forbidden weapon.

The fear of the taboo had set in deep nowadays.

"Forget about designing such a weapon. Fabricating it without tipping anyone off is the biggest problem with this mission."

Ves never travelled alone nowadays. People constantly kept their eye on him, and while he could obfuscate their observation methods with his Privacy Shield, it did not block any naked eyeballs from seeing what he was up to.

Running his stealth augment was too costly to consider. His stealth only held up for five minutes before his comm ran out of power. Ves could hardly work in short, 5 minute intervals, especially when he began his fabrication.

The best solution for now would be to travel somewhere remote with a 3D printer. As long as he could do the dirty deed in the middle of nowhere, the System wouldn't quibble with him as long as he fabricated a successful copy.

Ves thought about his two production lines just then. The newer production line that centered around the Dortmund printer was absolutely essential to the LMC.

The older one however had been relegated to a backup line. The mech technicians mainly used the second-hand printer and assembly system to practice their skills, fabricate some replacement components or fulfill some odd jobs.

In other words, no one cared about it anymore.

A plan formed in his mind. In order to design and fabricate a graser rifle in peace, he planned to bring the second-hand printer along with a number of supplies and raw materials and move out to a remote planet, moon or asteroid and work alone from there.

Ves figured that he could fit everything he needed in the Barracuda, if only barely. The printer took up the most space by far, but the cargo bay should have enough space left over for a couple of smaller containers filled with supplies.

"Fabricating a rifle doesn't consume a lot of resources. I don't have to bring too much."

A complication emerged when Ves tried to formulate which resources he should bring. If he guessed wrong and ended up missing a vital resource to produce a graser rifle, then he had to halt the entire project and call for the Barracuda to ship the missing materials, which wasted valuable time and risked getting found out.

He estimated that the entire design and fabrication process shouldn't take too long. In ideal conditions, he might be able to manage it within a week. The need for secrecy ate up even more time than the actual process.

If Ves wanted to apply his upgraded Physics to his upcoming rifleman mech design, then he had no choice but to delay its design by several weeks.

He considered skipping this troublesome upgrade mission for now, but ultimately decided to take the extra time to go through with it. He needed every advantage possible to narrow the gap against his competition.

Hardly any Apprentice Mech Designer managed to find their footing in the oversaturated market for rifleman mechs. Even though many buyers jostled for mechs, even more sellers hawked their wares at them. The dizzying amount of choices meant that new designs hardly gained any attention unless they offered something compelling.

Ves knew his current Skills could only allow him to design a mech that underperformed compared to the mainstream model. Even Journeyman Mech Designers hadn't been able to compete head-on against these highly developed designs.

The only successful cases where they succeeded was when their designs happened to fill a niche through sheer strength.

Ves saw hope in this approach. The prerequisite of course was to upgrade a Skill to Senior-level.

Before he arrived at somewhere safe and isolated, Ves absolutely couldn't risk begin his design work on a graser weapon.

"I guess I better get the ball rolling." He muttered to himself and closed the page.

In the next hour, Ves called Captain Silvestra to drop whatever the Barracuda was doing and come back to Cloudy Curtain. He also arranged the transport of the old second-hand printer and a number of supplies and raw materials.

While his workers scratched their heads and puzzled over why the boss wanted to take the printer away, Ves informed his company of his brief absence.

As usual, his COO Jake disapproved of his random jaunt. "This is highly irresponsible. I thought we are clear about the consequences of any further adventures. I don't know what you are up to, but a chief designer who is constantly missing is not a good sign that the LMC is stable."

"Does stability even matter?" Ves retorted. He did not intend anyone to persuade him from his course. "This is not a public company. I don't have to answer to any shareholders except for myself. What I'm about to do is for the betterment of the LMC. Once I return, I'll be more than capable of designing a strong and commercially viable rifleman mech."

Jake had to take his word for it. The old man still looked at him with disapproval. "Try to keep in touch over the galactic net if you can. Even if you are heading to somewhere isolated, we'd still like to know you are physically safe and secure."

"That will likely be a problem. I'll be working well away from civilization. I can't afford anyone to stay close to me, including the Barracuda. I'll be out of range of her quantum entanglement node, so I won't be able to access the galactic net or call anyone with my comm during this period."

In his planning, the Barracuda would only check up on him once every few days in case he needed to order more raw materials. The rest of the time, his corvette should stay far away from his work site in order to prevent his activities from being leaked to any spies.

Ves never forgot who made the Barracuda in the first place. He won the ship after winning the finals at Leemar's Open Competition. The Leemar Institute of Technology could have stuffed all manner of bugs and listening devices on the ship. Even Lucky couldn't do anything about it as those features were integrated in the ship on a core level.

The best insurance would be to send the ship far away while he worked.

"Relax, Mr. Jake. I won't be going anywhere dangerous this time. I'll pick the most quiet, forgotten star system in the Republic and do my thing for a couple of weeks. Nothing will go wrong, I can guarantee you."

#### Chapter 340 Ripple Effects

The usually boisterous classroom in the academy abruptly fell into silence. Every potentate sat up straight as a uniformed mech pilot walked in front of the class. Joshua's eyes shone as he beheld the dashing man.

The man swept his view towards the boys and girls and mentally shook his head. What was the use of visiting these teenagers? They were at least five years away from being qualified to pilot mechs. Still, he had his orders.

"This is a time of war. The Vesia Kingdom has invaded us once again, and it is the duty of every citizen to repel them with the best of your ability. As mech cadets, your time has not yet come, but that is no excuse for you to slack off! The Mech Corps holds the frontlines so that kids like you can train in peace. Do not squander their sacrifice and continue to improve your skills. The Republic depends on you!"

Every boy and girl thrust out their chest in pride. A veritable wave of enthusiasm passed over the cadets as they imagined wearing the mech pilot's uniform one day. Every mech regiment utilized a different uniform scheme, which led to a lot of variety in the Mech Corps. Joshua himself only recognized a couple of them, and the man's black-and-yellow uniform eluded his knowledge.

"As a potentate of the Republic, the most talented of you are treasured by us. Certain individuals here have distinguished themselves in their training. I am here to invite a number of you to accompany me back to Bentheim and enroll in one of their most prestigious academies on a fast-track training program. I won't lie, it will be hard, and the amount of drop-outs will be high. But if even one of you perseveres, you will have a bright future ahead of you in the Mech Corps!"

The majority of the cadets frowned or groaned. They knew their scores well enough to realize that they didn't qualify for such an extravagant program. Instead, they turned their attention to Joshua and a couple of other talented classmates. Out of all of them, their performance stood out the most.

"Cadets Joshua, Liss and Maye, you are deemed eligible to take up this opportunity. Are you willing to serve the Republic?"

"We are!"

The mech pilot smiled. "We will send out an information package to your parents. So long as your parents consent to the program, you'll be eligible to apply."

The rest of the classroom envied Joshua and the rest. None of them scored remarkably well in their training courses. In fact, their academy actually ranked at the bottom in the Republic. It couldn't be helped since Cloudy Curtain lacked a rich mech scene until recently.

The founding of the LMC and its subsequent rise changed all of that. Suddenly, their sleepy rural planet became a local hotbed for mechs as the LMC broke out of its shell with the release of the widely acclaimed Blackbeak model.

The mech manufacturer's ascension initiated a sea of change. Local politics had been thrown into a mess, while the influx of tax income invigorated public services. Culturally, the insular citizens of Cloudy Curtain finally opened up to the wider Republic.

Once stoked, the mech fever ran out of control. The enthusiastic younger generation flocked to the LMC like ducks and became the company's diehard fans.

The potentates among them formed a virtual fanclub called the LMC Association. They established a presence in every virtual game including Iron Spirit.

Joshua owed much of his recent success to the Association and the game. The only reason why he improved so quickly was that he wanted to pilot the LMC's higher starred virtual mechs.

Ves Larkinson published a handful of virtual mechs in his brief career. Over time, the members of the Association flocked to one dominant model in each tier. It became something of a badge of pride if the members could master every bestseller mech.

Currently, the list included the following mechs:

1-star: Fantasia 2R Seraphim - Aerial Marksman

2-star: TOC-1S Old Soul - Ambush Rifleman

3-star: HPL-100S Young Blood - Knight

4-star: FFL-25P DarkSpear - Assassin Mech

## 5-star: CA-1C2 Marc Antony Mark II - Hybrid Knight

The boisterous members of the Association generally reached a broad consensus on the first four mechs. Each of them represented the best mechs of their tier. Most of them consisted of Mr. Larkinson's latest virtual designs.

The only place the members couldn't agree on was the Marc Antony Mark II. As a Hybrid Knight, it was hard to pilot. Only the older members of the Association had reached the Gold League where they could unlock the ability to pilot a 5-star mech, and they all encountered significant difficulties trying to control the Mark II's many weapons.

Frankly speaking, the recently released Blackbeak virtual mech was much more suitable as a poster mech for the 5-star tier. As a pure knight mech, it lacked the complicated and uncoordinated weapon systems of the older design. While it didn't fare very well in small-scale duels, it still found a respectable place in Warntorn Instances and other larger game modes.

The only problem was the price. As a premium design, the Blackbeak sold for a ridiculous amount of gold or real credits. Only a handful of long-time players accumulated enough gold to exchange for the mech. The rest could only stare enviously.

In any case, Joshua had worked hard the last couple of years. Ever since he first came across Chasing Clouds' mechs, he had no idea that he was piloting a product of a homegrown hero. After Mr. Larkinson came into prominence, his drive to master Mr. Larkinson's mechs had grown into a deep-seated obsession.

At his age, he should still be languishing in the upper Bronze League or the lower Silver League. Instead, he rocketed upwards until he finally broke through the Gold League.

His hard work paid off! The moment he promoted to the Gold League, he instantly spent the credits he'd been saving so far on a virtual copy of the DarkSpear mech, which had gained some notoriety in the Bentheim mech scene.

Joshua tasted bliss as he piloted the assassin mech. He utilized the skills he gained from mastering the Old Soul and achieved a decent amount of success with the assassin mech.

Still, it had been rough the first couple of months. His ranking fell as he struggled to adapt to the higher pace of the Gold League. His game account even demoted back to Silver League at some point, but the skills he learned from the high-pressure upper league allowed him to bounce back to Gold League in a brief amount of time.

His performance in game reflected back in his performance in the academy. Joshua sat at the top of his year in academy. Almost no one his age could match him in a duel.

To be honest, Joshua only accepted the invitation to attend an elite academy in Bentheim because he'd be able to promote his ranking faster.

"I'll be able to pilot Mr. Larkinson's 5-star mechs sooner if I go to Bentheim."

If the mech pilot who visited his class heard those words, he'd wring Joshua's neck. The Vesians have invaded the Republic's borders, and all you can think about is playing a game?!

Across Cloudy Curtain, Joshua consisted of a small number of mech cadets that recently showed a lot of promise. Each of them owed their improvement to the LMC in some way. The passion the mech company engendered among its fans had lit a fire inside their hearts

If the LMC initially stoked the fire, then Walter's Whalers fanned the flames.

Their participation and subsequent return from the Glowing Planet Campaign had captured the minds of the locals.

The proliferation of recordings from the Whalers and many other participants of the struggle to secure the Glowing Planet's resources had captured the minds of the entire Komodo Star Sector.

It sounded like an adventure drama. The Whalers arrived at the Glowing Planet and survived through several crises before they limped back home with a huge pot of gold. Billions of credits flowed into their account, and in the first couple of weeks they threw out party after party. The entire planet revelled in the success of the gang.

Only a handful stood still at the losses. Walter, Dietrich, Fadah and the other cadre quietly consoled the survivors and set aside two-hundred million credits for their pensions. It was the least they could do, and they didn't lack for money now in any case.

Once the partying had subsided, a contentious discussion ensued within the gang. Some of the older members wanted to retire with their riches, while others wanted to continue the good fight but with better mechs.

"Haven't we struggled for years in the mud for a big score like this?" An older member asked. "Look at how much we earned! We're richer than most companies right now! I bet we're worth even more than the LMC right now! The time to pilot mechs is over. If anything, we can hire others to pilot mechs in our stead!"

Even though a couple of members agreed with that position, Dietrich quickly thumped his fist on the conference table. "Is retiring all you can think about? Then go ahead and leave, but don't expect to get a large share of the prize. This money belongs to the Whalers! As far as I'm concerned, this is the time

where our gang can flourish! With the Vesians knocking on our borders, the last thing we should do is to put down our mechs!"

The argument went back and forth for both sides. While many Whalers wanted to leave behind their old profession, others wanted to expand their organization and become more formidable in everyone's eyes. These hardcore members couldn't imagine a life of peace and leisure.

Once the two sides entered a deadlock, Walter finally intervened. "Walter's Whalers will continue on until we all drop dead or drop out. Those of you who wants to retire may do so. If you fought alongside me on the Glowing Planet, then I'll make sure you earned your fair share. As for the rest, don't expect us to be generous."

A substantial number of members who advocated for early retirement had in fact been left behind on Cloudy Curtain. They never shed their blood on behalf of the Whalers. Instead, they stared greedily at the tens of billions of credits the Whalers had earned from the sale of their mining haul to the Republic.

Walter's words instantly doused their greed. Most of the freeloaders subsequently quieted down and expressed no further interest in a retirement. Each of them could only expect to receive about fifty-thousand credits, which was a pittance.

In contrast, Walter treated those who experienced the tough campaign on the Glowing Planet and wanted to leave for one reason or another more sincerely. Though the Whalers still retained the lion's share of the pot, Walter issued a billion credits to the retirees, turning all of them into enviable pensioners.

Once everyone who still expressed a desire to leave had left, Walter addressed the loyalists who stuck by his organization.

"I won't lie to you. Much of the money we've made will be spent on mechs, ships and equipment. If you think you'll be able to drink the finest drinks and

eat cloud rice every way then you're mistaken. We have a lifetime opportunity to become an elite outfit and I won't squander it away by wasting it on luxuries!"

No one outwardly objected to his decision, though plenty of members complained within their hearts at Walter's excessive frugality.

"In the coming months, we will build up our strength. Our first order of business is to fill up our roster and expand our scope. I hope to we can grow our numbers to the point where we can field a thousand mechs at a time."

"A thousand mechs!?"

That was half a regiment! So many mechs would turn the Whalers from a rural bully into a regional powerhouse. Though they'll never be able to surpass the Three Tyrants who ruled over Bentheim, such numbers gave them the qualification to contest over other minor star systems!

Each outfit that returned from the Glowing Planet intact experienced similar transformations. These lucky gangs and mercenary corps outpaced their rivals and competitors by far and began to recruit en masse.

The balance of power in the Bentheim region decisively shifted in their favor.