

Chapter 401 Helpful Tips

They entered the end sprint.

Ves personally accompanied the modified prototype to the newly erected testing grounds a fair distance away from the Mech Nursery. He witnessed each test in person and made his own observations about the prototype's performance.

From what he saw so far, his rifleman mech design performed up to expectations. It weaved nimbly around the obstacle, showing hardly any signs of slowing down. As a fast and nimble medium mech, the prototype demonstrated both speed and resilience.

Even the people who supervised the tests couldn't help but let out admiring gasps when the prototype finally revealed the power of the chest crystal.

After being hit by a number of laser beams, the crystal started twinkling in white. After the test pilot sent out a command, the chest crystal unleashed a powerful but controlled beam of light with almost the same properties of a conventional crystal, but with a lot more oomph behind its power.

"The beam is at least twice as powerful as a standard laser cannon!"

That wouldn't change any paradigms anytime soon, but it sounded impressive nonetheless. The capability to unleash a laser beam twice as powerful as a cannon should come as a nasty surprise to the rifleman mech's opponents.

It was too bad that the crystal couldn't be charged in any other way than firing lasers at it, not if you wanted to be safe. The crystal also didn't hold its charge for very long and fizzled out rather quickly, throwing up a lot of excess heat into the vicinity as a result.

"It's still a gimmick." Carlos noted at the side while Ves engrossed himself in studying the data readouts. "I really don't see this feature being very useful.

Sure, it's impressive for a mech of that size to be able to unleash a powerful beam, but it won't have many opportunities to show off that feature. It can only be charged if it's shot at. Even if it carries a decent amount of armor, I don't see any mech pilot volunteering to go out in a laser storm."

Ves grunted. "You're right, but the crystal can be charged in other ways as well. It doesn't discriminate between sides, so there's no problem with asking other mechs to shoot at its chest crystal."

"As if anything like that will happen. It's more efficient if those laser rifleman mechs don't waste their battery packs on tricks like that."

Ves did not believe it was as straightforward as Carlos made it out to be. He could figure out several potential advantages to pre-charging the central crystal. He did not worry about the center crystal lacking any applications.

Although the crystal technology still hid a lot of secrets, Ves was pleased by the value it added to his design. Perhaps in the future he'd be able to bring out its full strength.

The testing grounds continued to grind away at the prototype. Ves gathered a lot of data on the soundness of its construction and the performance of each of its components. He paid a lot of attention to the targeting system, which turned out to be snappy and responsive, though it wasn't very accurate at longer ranges.

The further away his mech was from its target, the more effort it had to expend to break past the enemy mech's ECM. Against skirmishers which specialized in taking out ranged mechs, this effect could become very pronounced.

A skilled enough pilot stopped relying on external aids anyway. AIs and processors always glitched out and failed at the worst possible moments.

Mech pilots had been taught to rely on their own skills instead of the comforts provided their mechs.

A mech pilot was there to pilot his mech, not the other way around.

From the fifth day onwards, the testing grounds started to subject the prototype to more demanding tests. This mostly involved subjecting it to extreme conditions. They had to find out if the design delivered all of its promises in terms of survivability.

It was at this time when a very important piece of news spread throughout the Republic. The Mech Corps sent out a formal message to millions of mech designers.

Within the LMC, only Carlos received a notification from the Mech Corps. It arrived in his comm with a special sound that his comm normally never released.

Both Ves and Carlos looked at each other with dismay.

"I knew this would happen." Carlos sighed and raised his comm to read the message. "I've been drafted."

Both of them saw it coming, though Ves always hoped that the Mech Corps would somehow overlook his friend. After all, despite graduating as a mech designer, he never did anything of the sort. He had no designs to his name. He didn't even publish a single virtual mech.

"When do you have to leave?"

"They already booked passage for me. I'm to board the next convoy from Cloudy Curtain to Bentheim. That's in two days."

"That's not a lot of time."

"The Mech Corps doesn't wait for anyone."

Now that the first wave of mech designers got called up, the war would probably enter a heated state very soon. The cautious probes and occasional raids that characterized the majority of the battles between the two sides would make way for harrowing battles in space and on the ground.

Ves accompanied Carlos they went through the paperwork. This ensured that Carlos would seamlessly be able to return to the LMC after his service ended.

"How long do you think the war will drag on?" Carlos asked as they ate a meal in one of the Mech Nursery's restaurants.

"If it's the same as the last ones, then it's going to last for four to six years."

That meant that Carlos might end up a very different man after the Mech Corps released him. The thought of what low-ranking mech designers had to go through during the war freaked him out.

"Hey!" Ves reached out and grasped his friend's shaking hand. "Working near or at the frontlines can be bad, but it's also a fantastic learning opportunity! As long as you listen to the chief technicians in charge, you won't get lost, I promise you."

"Wise words from someone who had seen it all?"

"You can say that."

What he experienced on Groening IV and the Glowing Planet changed his life and built his character. Ves might have encountered a number of close shaves, but he also came out stronger after he conquered every challenge in his way.

Over the course of their dinner, Ves proceeded to tutor Carlos on how to survive his coming tour of service. He enthralled his friend with tales and cautioned him to always watch his back.

"A crisis can happen at any moment. No one will watch out for you when all hell breaks loose. The only person who cares about your safety is yourself and no one else."

Carlos frowned. "Geez. That sounds really pessimistic. Is it really that bad?"

"It depends on where you end up, but even if you are assigned to the rearguard, you shouldn't relax too much."

"With my background, I don't have any chance of landing a plushy posting." Carlos said with a rueful smile. "It's straight to the frontlines for me."

Even Ves didn't hold out hope for Carlos to be sent somewhere far away. The Mech Corps was not a completely incorruptible institution. Ves grew up long enough among the Larkinsons to hear about how they really worked. When he studied mech design at Rittersberg, he heard other stories that confirmed all those tales.

The truth was that low-ranking mech designers with backing and connections always seemed to end up in the rear. As for mech designers who enjoyed nothing of the sorts, they somehow never ended up more than a stone's throw away from all of the action.

The only thing that Carlos had going for was that he worked for Ves, who in turn enjoyed a modest amount of backing from a Master Mech Designer.

Still, the connection between Carlos and Master Olson was nonexistent. No one believed that Carlos enjoyed any protection from someone who held an important status in the Friday Coalition. At best, Carlos was an extension of the LMC and Ves.

Despite his great strides in recent times, Ves knew that his prestige hadn't reach the level where people could recognize him on the streets or where the Mech Corps took special care of him. Carlos had to fend for himself at the frontlines.

"I don't blame you, Ves. I'm much better off than when I previously worked a dead-end job in quality control. My design skills have improved a lot, and I'll be able to offer a lot of help to a crew of mech technicians."

Ves nodded reassuringly. "I've kept an eye on your progress. At your level, you should be capable of modifying mechs."

Mech technicians couldn't make any significant modifications to existing mechs without locking them up. Most of the time, they overlooked something critical that led to the emergence of fatal flaws or compatibility issues. Only someone with a mech design background could safely perform major modifications such as adding extra armor to a mech.

"That sounds like a good idea. I can stand out in this way."

"Don't forget to check in with the chief technician before you do anything drastic. Just because a mech technician tells you something is okay doesn't mean he knows what he's talking about."

"You're always telling me to establish a rapport with the chief technician. Why is he so important? Shouldn't I be buttering up my superiors?"

"Who's going to be your superior? Most of the times, it's another mech designer! It would be great if your boss wants to be chummy with all of his subordinates, but from what I've heard, that never happens. Don't forget that you're competitors as well!"

Carlos started to get it. "If I perform better than my boss, he'll probably try to squash me down, is that right?"

"That's what all the Larkinsons told me back when I was young. The mech pilots seem to view conflicts between mech designer as an amusing distraction. It might be funny to them, but it's awful if that happens to you."

"What can I do then? Will I have to keep my head down forever? How will I be able to get a promotion out of the frontlines then?"

"That's where the chief technician comes into play. You see, all those mech designers sent to the bases are there to help with the repair and maintenance of all of the mechs of the Republic. You and all the other mech designers are the guests there. The true person in charge will always be the chief technicians on the base."

Ves made a lot of sense. Carlos nodded like an eager chick as Ves continued his explanation.

"Nothing happens in the mech stables and the workshops without the approval of the chiefs. All of them are career servicemen without exception and have the power to ruin the lives of any mech designer that doesn't play by the rules. They hold all the actual power there."

"I see! So even if they aren't all that high up on the totem pole, they're still more important than the base commander, is that right?"

"For you, yes. Base commanders don't have any reason to pay attention to you. Chief technicians do. They treat their mechs like their own children and hope that mech designers like you do so as well. In order to earn their acknowledgement, you have to demonstrate that you care."

"Isn't that a given? I'm a citizen of the Republic, of course I care!"

"Platitudes aren't enough. My uncle and aunts told me that chief technicians often blow up in front of mech designers who still can't get over the fact that the Mech Designers took them away from their comfy workshops and plopped them in the middle of a war zone. Even if you want to get out, don't do it in a way that disrespects the people who fight the good fight."

Ves graced Carlos with many other tips like that. Unlike someone who had no clue what the Mech Corps wanted with all of these low-ranking mech

designers, Ves heard a lot from his uncles and aunts who participated in the last war.

Both sides often targeted each other's mech technicians. As the war dragged on, the Republic and the Kingdom might experience a shortage in technical personnel. For that reason, the Republic didn't hesitate to rope in all of the marginal mech designers who barely eked out a career in the private sector.

"Mech designers like you are spares in their eyes."

Chapter 402 Final Sprin

Too many people tried to make a living as a mech designer. Due to a low barrier of entry combined with substantial capital requirements, most people who graduated with a degree in mech design managed to get one foot through the door.

That did not mean they immediately became full-fledged mech designers. Getting the other foot through as well took an extraordinary amount of effort. Without talent, wealth or connections, most mech designers turned into overqualified mech technicians or marginal businesspeople who only sold two mechs a year or so.

Obviously, these low-ranking mech designers really didn't do anything useful, so by and large they wouldn't be missed if they were pulled out of their current jobs.

Like any state, the Bright Republic faced an abundance of mech designers and a shortage of technical personnel. Using an abundance of one resource to make up for the scarcity in the other made a lot of sense.

The truth was that low-ranking mech designers used up a lot of resources that could have been spent more productively. For example, property prices in Bentheim reached insane levels due to the sheer amount of mech designers setting down their workshops on the same planet.

Bluntly said, without culling them every once in a while, the Bright Republic's mech industry would eventually turn into a stagnant and lethargic environment.

Due to his upbringing, Ves understood some of the opinions policy makers held towards mech designers. After enlightening Carlos with what he knew, his friend fell silent.

"So they're treating us as a nuisance, is that right?" He asked.

"It's not so bad. In the previous wars, many mech designers died, but those who thrived during the chaos went on to reinvigorate their careers after the war. Don't see it as a burden, but instead, look at it as a precious opportunity to polish your abilities under the most ruthless training program imaginable."

While neither the Bright Republic or the Vesia Kingdom ever admitted it, the Bright-Vesia Wars invigorated the states and ceaselessly improved their military might. The cost was great, but the consumption of less well-performing assets gave ample room for things that worked better.

This applied to both mech pilots and mech designers. States that rarely engaged in war always lost their edge over time as their underlying inefficiencies spread through their ranks like an incurable disease.

"You sure see the bright side in everything." Carlos chuckled. "If you ask any other mech designer, they want to do everything they can to avoid being sent to the frontlines."

While Ves believed in what he said, he mostly wanted to console his friend and shift his mindset to a more productive mindstate.

"That's the difference between you and the rest. Mech designers should never stop improving their skills. Every challenge is a valuable experience that can enrich your skills and your design philosophy. I hope that by the time you return to the LMC, you can assist me in designing its next mechs."

Carlos immediately perked up. "Is that a promise?!"

Haha! I knew that would catch your attention." Ves smiled and retrieved a small box before passing it to him. "It's not a promise, but a possibility. As long as you can show you've progressed, then the LMC will open its doors to your design input."

That meant a lot to Carlos. He knew more than anyone else how much Ves obsessed over the quality of his products. Ves always took control over the entire design process because he trusted no one else to do a good job.

"What's in this box?"

"Open it up."

Four shiny pills rested in the box. They glimmered in yellow and it appeared as if they had been shaped by the sun.

"Wow! What are these?"

"They are special pills meant to give you a boost in mental capacity. They're extremely rare and very hard to get a hold of. It's already generous for me to supply you with four of them. Make sure to read the instructions carefully and ingest them in the right order."

What Ves gifted Carlos was in fact a handful of Intelligence Attribute Candies. He spent a significant chunk of his limited reserve of DP to acquire four of them at once. The System conveniently tailored them for Carlos too, so there shouldn't be any incompatibilities.

While Ves wanted to boost Carlos' Intelligence all the way to 2.0, it would have raised too many flags if that happened.

Increasing his Intelligence by 0.4 should give his friend enough of a boost to unearth his potential during his tour of service without attracting too much attention.

After sending Carlos off, Ves took a brief rest before throwing himself back to work. After the Mech Corps processed the low-ranking mech designers, they would certainly call up the next tier of mech designers. Ves did not have much time left to publish his second original design.

The LMC's testing grounds never stopped putting the modified prototype to its paces. Day and night the operators worked in shifts to explore the range of capabilities that the rifleman mech offered.

Especially in the last days, the mech continued to get beat up by a combination of physical force and energy attacks. Even then, its frame remarkably held up even as its compressed armor started to peel apart. His second design inherited a portion of the resilience of his first design, which would make it one of the more durable rifleman mechs at this weight class.

Weaknesses still remained. Though the mech could operate for an extensive amount of time with the fuel-based Trailblazer engine, heat management remained an issue during intensive combat.

This was a mech that performed best in low-intensity battles that dragged out over time. It did not excel in short bursts of combat such as duels where mech pilots demanded peak performance and immediate impact out of their mechs.

Ves did not set out to design such a mech in the first place. At its current configuration, his rifleman mechs neatly complimented his Blackbeak offerings. Both mechs fulfilled different roles but could go on the same missions without worrying about a mismatch in capabilities.

As one test operator put it, they shared a very deep bond. "They're like brothers and sisters."

Ves held an ambitious dream of filling up the LMC's catalog with an entire family of mechs that all shared the same core traits. However, the coming war

and the demands of the Republic put a wrench in his plans. He'd be lucky enough to complete his current design before the Mech Corps called him up.

The issue worried him to such an extent that he broke from his estrangement with his grandfather and sent him a call.

"Ves, this is not a good time for me to speak to you." Benjamin Larkinson answered gruffly as he scratched at his collared neck. "You're lucky you called me during a recess in a conference. I don't have much time."

"I just wanted to ask you if you can tell me when the second wave of mech designers are going to be called up. I'm in the middle of finishing my second original design, but I still need a couple of weeks."

His grandfather grumbled underneath his breath. "You know I can't tell you that. Even if I knew, the Mech Corps will scorch me over a fire if I leak out the date. All I can tell you is that you better hurry up."

After Benjamin hung up, Ves nodded in satisfaction. He knew that his grandfather couldn't explicitly tell him the date, but he was better off after the call. The hint at the end told him enough.

"I can still make it in time."

The testing grounds accelerated the final tests and brutally treated the prototype like a disposable piece of metals. The mech eventually succumbed under all of the damage, turning most of its internals scrap to be sent for recycling.

Ves gathered all of the data gathered by the testing grounds and used them to spot out any remaining flaws in his current design.

At this stage, he largely smoothed out the major flaws in the designs. Most of the data only indicated that the design contained a number of issues that would be very difficult to resolve. Most of them already consisted of

compromises that Ves had made in order to achieve a balance between different priorities.

Swinging one way or the other only solved one problem while making another one worse.

"It's too difficult to optimize this mech any further."

He only made a small number of tweaks, ones which he was sure wouldn't affect his mech in an unpredictable way. His focus on haste meant that Ves couldn't afford to make any additional design choices. A drastic change that affected the integrity of the entire mech demanded the construction of another prototype.

His grandfather told him to hurry up, so where would Ves be able to find the time for another round of tests?

Ves felt rather bad about leaving his design in its current state. It wasn't quite the perfectly polished machine he was hoping for. Its limited weight and volume capacities combined with the complexity inherent in rifleman mechs meant that his design required a lot more time to perfect.

"I'm running out of time."

Once he reached the point where he no longer found a way to improve his design in a short amount of time, he was ready to enter the final stage.

"It's time to give you a name." Ves spoke out, addressing both his nearly-complete design and the spirit of the crystal golem resting in his mind.

In the past few months, as he worked to bring his vision into fruition, Ves constantly thought about the appropriate name for his rifleman mech. His heart told him that his second original design required a lofty name to do it justice.

Since he constantly channeled the spirit of the crystal golem when he designed this mech, he came up with a simple but succinct name for his design. It was one which he had been weighing over together with the crystal golem. Eventually, the spirit gave out its stamp of approval.

"From now on, you will be known as the Crystal Lord."

The name not only described the mech, it also harkened back to the roots of the crystal golem which would soon inhabit the design. Ves did not forget about the crystal garden and the corpse of the alien leader which he retrieved from that magical but fallen place.

Something seemed to have changed when he uttered the name. Speaking it out loud somehow infused it with some weight, as if it had gained a life on its own. Ves felt as if he was at the cusp of making history in the field of mech design.

He certainly looked forward to the end product. He had a very good feeling about his second original design. Working with a spirit derived from a powerful being of the past was a very novel experience, and one that would certainly impact the X-Factor in a powerful way.

"Will I finally break into the B grade with the X-Factor?"

He was about to find out. Ves looked around in a conspicuous manner, even though nobody else was present on his private workshop floor.

After scanning his surroundings, he turned to his comm and activated his Privacy Shield before engaging the Superpublish option.

[Are you certain you wish to Superpublish the Crystal Lord CL-A-01 design?]

[Superpublishing in progress. Please wait...]

[Design Evaluation: Crystal Lord CL-A-01]

Model name: Crystal Lord CL-A-01

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson

Weight Classification: Medium-Light

Recommended Role: Mobile Rifleman Mech

Armor: B-

Carrying Capacity: D

Aesthetics: C+

Endurance: B

Energy Efficiency: C+

Flexibility: B

Firepower: B

Integrity: B+

Mobility: B

Spotting: C+

X-Factor: B-

Cost efficiency: D

Project involvement: 100%

Original component composition: 18%

Overall evaluation: The Crystal Lord is a speed-oriented third-class rifleman mech design that, like its knight mech predecessor, excels in lengthy conflicts. The crystal technology embedded into the frame and the rifle of this design is novel and can be an asset to the design in certain circumstances.

[You have received 1,000 Design Points for completing an original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 1,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a substantial presence of X-Factor.]

Chapter 403 Price of Performance

The System provided a very flattering evaluation of the Crystal Lord compared to its usual conduct. It always graded his designs in comparison with similar models which competed in the same market segment, so Ves always got a good picture on how his designs would fare in the market.

The most important take from the evaluation was that the X-Factor finally broke through the ceiling! This immediately prompted Ves to whoop in excitement.

"I did it! Hahaha! Finally!"

The moment he Superpublished the design, the spirit of the crystal golem finally left his mind and began to inhabit the abruptly improved design. This lifted a huge weight off his chest, allowing Ves to breathe easy for the first time in months. He hadn't realized how much of a burden the crystal golem represented.

Its mental strength had actually grown by a fair margin! Ves just never realized the change because it happened gradually.

"I hope you enjoy your new home!"

While Ves had no idea what kind of difference it made, it was still a cause for celebration. He looked forward to seeing footage of the mech in battle and see whether its mech pilots drew strength from the X-Factor.

After he got over his jubilation, Ves sobered up and started to study his design from a more sober perspective. What had the Superpublish function accomplished? The System promised that the function would comprehensively improve his design by ten percent.

"What does ten percent actually mean?"

It was like claiming to improve a piece of art by ten percent. How could you quantify the improvement in an objective manner? Was it a straightforward boost in specs, or would the System work in a more indirect manner? Ves was very curious about its methods, so he quickly dove into the results.

He turned his attention back to the evaluation.

"Hm. It's kind of a muddle, now that I see it. That's not very great."

While a lot of criteria scored rather high, some of them fell short of his expectations. Even with the power of the Superpublish effect, the System could only do so much to boost the inadequacies that he left in his design.

His design received a lot of scores in the B range, which meant the Crystal Lord performed better than average in those criteria, but not to the extent of becoming a compelling selling point.

His design also came with two very impactful weaknesses that Ves hadn't fully taken into account before he published his design.

First, the carrying capacity of his mech was rather dismal for its mission profile. Mechs expected to be deployed for many days or weeks needed to carry its own supplies. As big, independent war machines famous for their ability to operate under difficult conditions without excessive requirements, having a rifleman mech that could hardly carry its own supplies was a big demerit.

"It's like a ship geared to traverse long distances but only having the fuel capacity to complete half of it. There's a mismatch between possibility and reality."

Still, his customers should be able to get around this problem by passing the burden on mechs with greater carrying capacities. While that sounded like an excuse, it happened all the time with regards to light mechs.

Larger outfits even relied on dedicated transport shuttles or cargo mechs to carry their supplies during deployments.

So while the Crystal Lord's carrying capacity looked disappointing, it wasn't anything fatal.

"The cost is another matter."

Despite using up much less expensive compressed armor plating than the Blackbeak, the cost of the Crystal Lord actually surpassed the knight mech. The difficulty in reproducing the crystals embedded in the chest jacked up the price by quite a lot. Once he improved the crystal synthesizer, Ves expected to bring down the cost by a decent amount.

Still, even if he solved this issue, that didn't mean he wouldn't be able to charge an affordable price for his rifleman mechs. Even with a hundred percent success rate in producing the crystals, the fact that it gobbled up a lot of pricy exotics added up a hefty amount to the total price tag.

"It's not cheap to implement these gimmicks." He frowned as he looked at the breakdown of the production cost of a single copy of the Crystal Lord.

The gold label mech with a full-sized chest crystal cost 10 million credits more than a mech that left out this boondoggle.

The cost became much more generous if Ves shrank its size as he planned to do with the bronze and silver label versions of the same model. The extra costs would only amount to 4 to 5 million credits.

The total estimated production cost was hard to determine due to the constant fluctuation in the price of raw materials. For the gold label Crystal Lord, Ves carefully estimated that it cost around 45 to 50 million credits to reproduce a single copy.

Ves couldn't help but wince when he finished his calculations. "This is already more than the Blackbeak."

Many people would scratch their heads if they saw the difference in costs. Rifleman mechs always cost less than knight mechs. Only rarely would the reverse be true, especially with models that shared so many commonalities with each other.

"Well, the Blackbeak is a basic mech that looks beautiful on its own while the Crystal Lord needs a big fat jewel in order to feel appreciated."

The Blackbeak product line competed in a fairly niche market segment. The competition wasn't as intense, allowing Ves to focus on its fundamental attributes and rely on them to drive its sales.

The Crystal Lord faced a much more brutal environment. It was not enough to compete on an even playing field. It needed a step up in order to stand out from the dominant models in the market.

Ves relied on several unique advantages to increase the appeal of his Crystal Lords. "The specs, the gimmicks, the X-Factor and my Mastery should all be powerful draws in unison."

He didn't let his design's shiny toys distract him from his core goal to deliver a well-performing design.

As the System's evaluation attested, the performance of his rifleman mech by and large surpassed its equivalents by a modest margin. As Ves called up the Superpublished design and compared it to the pre-published version, he spotted various subtle but ingenious improvements.

"It's truly worth it to Superpublish this design!"

If he hadn't gone for this extra step, then he wouldn't be able to justify the prices he planned to charge for his mech. His own thoughts combined with the

consultations he held with the Marketing Department allowed him to come up with a tentative pricing scheme that would slightly put the Blackbeak to shame.

"The bronze label variant should cost 65 million credits while the silver label will still look appealing if I charge 75 million credits for it. As for the gold label Crystal Lord, only a price of 90 million credits will do it justice."

The premium he charged for the bronze label version that the LMC would rely on third-party manufacturers to produce looked very reasonable. It cost a bit more than a Blackbeak, but its performance combined with the value that the gimmicks brought to the table should lead to a brisk amount of sales.

The LMC mass produced the silver label version in-house, therefore they cost a fair bit more. In exchange, buyers would receive a Crystal Lord with the same crystals as the bronze label versions, but activated with the help of the crystal cube.

"Anyone else can reproduce these crystals given time and effort."

When the LMC would inevitably bestow some licensing contracts to a couple of third-party manufacturers, they would receive detailed design schematics that lined out how to create the crystals.

Ves never expected to keep its secrets to himself. Due to the MTA's enforcement of licensing structures, Ves would still be able to benefit in case some other company pirated his innovations, but that still allowed his competitors to flood the market with imitation models.

Being an innovator meant you had to spend a lot of money and resources to invent something new. While this allowed you to release a product on the market that enabled you to recoup your costs, it also enabled rivals to copy your finished product and release their own versions without those burdens.

"This is why the licensing scheme exists."

The MTA knew that designs could never stay confidential and that competitors constantly stole from each other. The licensing scheme existed to moderate these tendencies and to encourage innovators to keep on inventing new stuff.

To Ves, it didn't always work, but at least it tried. "It's better than nothing."

The activated crystals which enjoyed a significant boost in power compared to unactivated crystals allowed the LMC to protect itself against the inevitable outbreak of imitation models.

When those competitors tried to copy what Ves had achieved, they would quickly find out that they lacked an essential ingredient. Without it, their imitations would have no appeal compared to the original models.

Still, despite his many justifications for putting those high price tags on his products, it remained to be seen whether the market could stomach them. In a mech market where most premium rifleman mechs sold for around 40 to 45 million credits, asking buyers to cough up at least fifty percent more money to buy a slightly higher-performing model wasn't easy.

"It's up to the Marketing Department from now on."

Unless they convinced consumers that the Crystal Lord of the merits of its features, the LMC wouldn't be able to charge a fair price. This would definitely be a herculean challenge for his up-and-coming mech company.

"We had a lot of help with the introduction of the Blackbeak. This time, we're on our own."

The LMC released the Blackbeak with a lot of fanfare because it was his first original design. That was something special and a milestone to any mech designer.

In comparison with the abundant amount of publicity attracted to any debut designs, a second original design from the same mech designer hardly roused

any interest. Buyers and publications both considered those kinds of product releases routine.

"It's going to be hard to attract the attention of a lot of publications and build up hype for the Crystal Lord."

The problem was exacerbated by the fact that Ves might very well be absent at the upcoming press conference that would introduce the model to the galaxy. Right now, Ves had a lot on his plate, and very little time clear it up.

"I best finish the rest of my to-do list."

Ves proceeded to move quickly. In order to pass the MTA's validation process for each new original mech design, he needed to deliver a physical copy for them. He therefore went up to the fabrication floor and reserved the Dortmund production line for himself.

In the next three days, Ves carefully reproduced a flawless copy of the gold label Crystal Lord. Though he wanted to rush its fabrication, Ves forcefully pushed down his impatience and adhered to a slower pace that minimized the risk of slipping up.

He paid the most attention to synthesizing and activating the two crystals that would accompany the mech. He also capped off the finished product by personally affixing the label and one of Lucky's best gems in the cockpit of the mech.

When Ves stepped back, he joined the mech technicians standing to the side. They all practically worshipped the first production mech as if it was a god come to life.

What struck Ves the most at this point was that he could feel the impact of its powerful X-Factor in his heart. The mech radiated a sense of pride and threat in equal measure.

Ves could not forget about the alien race's lamentation for being so small. By fulfilling the dreams of the crystal golem of being put into a massive war machine that towered over most people it would come into touch, it carried a sense of completion that Ves had never encountered before in his other mechs.

The Crystal Lord hadn't just come to life. It also enjoyed its return to the living.

Chapter 404 Marketing Strategy

A lot of publicity accompanied the release of every new original mech design. Throughout the galaxy, millions of different mech models appeared on the market each day. How would consumers be able to make sense of the deluge in new designs?

In practice, due to resource limits, license limits, and regulatory restrictions, most mech models competed solely in the state it originated from. While this cut away most of the competition, it still left Ves with thousands of competing designs that fought over the limited attention span of their potential buyers.

This time, Ves wouldn't be able to enjoy the advantage of making his debut. Fortunately, the LMC of today was a lot bigger than when he published the Blackbeak design. Back then, he still based his company back at his old, cramped workshop.

Right now, the LMC not only owned three production systems, it also expanded its payroll by several times. Many problems that seemed difficult to Ves to solve by himself could easily be handed off to the right departments in the company.

Gavin was his contact person in the Marketing Department, which had been tasked with the challenge of making the Crystal Lord a success. Even before Ves completed his design, the Marketing Department already laid out the groundwork for the upcoming release.

"The MTA will be done with the validation of the Crystal Lord in two weeks or so. How soon can you arrange a press conference to introduce our latest product line to the Republic?"

Gavin quickly referenced a data pad. "We are working with all hands on deck right now. In principle, we can hold the press conference at any time, but we're still having trouble with inviting a sufficient amount of publications. Some of these news and media empires are really tough customers."

People interested in buying mechs rarely browsed the public catalog and sorted through the huge number of available models. They researched what they wanted on the galactic net and listened to advice from sources of authority.

News portals and mech portals formed a particularly powerful influences that could collectively make or break a new mech model. The key to making the market aware of his new product was to push it to the public consciousness through a combination of promotion and news coverage.

"Now that I've published my design, your progress in this area should go much faster, am I right?"

"That's right! It always helps to have a concrete example to show off!" Gavin eagerly nodded. "I do have to say it's a really smart idea for you to add such an attention-grabbing gimmick to your latest product. That already makes the Crystal Lord ten times better in terms of marketability."

"Added to that, its premium price point and its similarities to the Blackbeak line should also help with giving the Crystal Lord a boost."

Gavin looked a bit more hesitant at that. "The close relations between the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord will definitely be an asset, considering that your first design is already so prominent. In the right circumstances, we can

definitely enable the Crystal Lord to piggyback off the reputation of the Blackbeak. It's only..."

"The price?"

"Yes. The price. Even for your vaunted gold label masterpieces, charging 90 million credits is price gouging even to me. Everyone in the Marketing Department is sceptical whether you can get the Crystal Lord to take off with such a greedy price point."

Ves shook his head. "I don't agree. You have to be aware that the Mech Corps will call up the second wave of mech designers very soon. The number of gold label Crystal Lords on the market will definitely be a fraction of the gold label Blackbeaks currently in existence, and those already have a very magnanimous resale value."

"That resale value trended upwards over time. It's something that happened organically. You can't prematurely declare that your next product will instantly be worth the same."

"It's a high price, but I think it's more than fair considering what it brings to the table. The Crystal Lord is packed with value. In my opinion, the high price also serves as a symbol of its worth. If I charge any less, then the market won't take my product as seriously."

"They might not think so highly of the Crystal Lord, but at least they can afford a copy." Gavin retorted.

"If they want a more affordable copy, they can set their sights to the silver and bronze label Crystal Lords. Sure, their chest crystals will only be half the size, but it still retains much of the capabilities of the gold label version."

"Even if they're a little cheaper, it still won't be easy to push them into the hands of our customers. Only you would think that there are buyers ready to snap up rifleman mechs valued at 65 and 75 million credits."

"Leaving the gimmicks aside, charging such a price is still reasonable if you think about how I've integrated a substantial amount of compressed armor into its design. Most other armored rifleman mechs are only partially clad with the same kind of armor!"

"Alright, enough!" Gavin sighed and rubbed his eyes. "You don't need to convince me of the appeal of your new design. I just wanted to make you aware that most of the market will react the same as me when they first get to know our new product."

"I'm sure that you already have a plan to address those issues." Ves pointedly stated. He already let the Marketing Department know of the overall specs of his design as soon as he completed his draft design. If they hadn't figured out how to overcome these issues, then what was Ves paying them for? "All I need to know is your overall strategy. Do you have anything solid?"

"Well, the Crystal Lord is actually a great product for the spoiled brats segment. Think about it. The models are all expensive high-spec machines with cool gimmicks that make it a natural hit among the rich kids that want to pilot something distinct."

Ves curled down his mouth. "You mean people like Vincent Ricklin?"

"Exactly so. Laser rifleman mechs are universally popular in the mech market. A lot of potentates default to piloting these kinds of mechs because that's all they've trained for. We found out there's a decently strong demand for premium rifleman mech models that's expensive, easy to show off and easy to pilot."

That caused Ves to nod and frown at the same time. "The Crystal Lord definitely fits the first two criteria. As for being easy to pilot, well, according to the test pilots that put the prototype to the test, my design is definitely one of the more difficult rifleman mechs to pilot. I've always designed the Crystal

Lord to meet the needs of professionals, not the so-called spoiled brats who shy away at the first sight of blood."

He made many design choices that increased the performance of his mech at the cost of adding to the burden of the person in the cockpit.

Mechs designed to be easy to pilot often took a lot of decisions out of the hands of their mech pilots, thereby simplifying the control interface to a manageable level.

This might be acceptable to the casual potentate that never piloted a mech out of simulations, but a skilled mech pilot that relied on his machine to stay alive demanded more control. Through his recent Mastery experience with Alven, Ves learned how important it was for him to be able to fine-tune every possible action made by his mech.

Alven might be a religious nut, but his skill in piloting mechs was very real.

The explanation came as unwelcome news to Gavin. As a norm and someone who never really bought into the mystique of mechs, he wasn't aware of subtle but impactful details like this. "Oh. That is going to be a problem then. While I'm sure there are a couple of rich kids out there who know what they're doing, I guess we can't go through with our original plans."

They continued their discussion for a bit. Ves emphasized that the Crystal Lord fared best when piloted by someone skilled. Just like with the Blackbeak, the Crystal Lord was not a toy to be shown off to friends. Ves designed it to endure the rigors of war, and he was determined to see it thrive in the coming battles.

"Well, there's one more group who this mech should appeal to." Gavin suddenly remembered something. "All of those gangs and mercenary corps that returned from the Glowing Planet and received their rewards are still flush with money. Although many of them have already placed new orders, it's

impossible for them to run out of money soon. I bet there are a couple of mercenary commanders and gang leaders who are willing to spend a little extra to obtain a prestigious mech."

That sounded like a much better target audience. Ves quickly nodded. "That's the right approach. You can even approach the Whalers and sound them out if they are interested as well."

After Ves became reassured that the Marketing Department was on the right track, he left them to complete their preparations while Ves returned underground. He couldn't afford to slack off in what might be his last month with the LMC.

First, he began designing the bronze and silver label variants of the Crystal Lords.

With the Blackbeak line, the different labels mainly resulted in cosmetic differences. Principally, their performance should be equal, though in practice differences in familiarity, skill and equipment resulted in substantial differences in performance.

Ves couldn't do the same for the Crystal Lord, mainly due to the difficulty of synthesizing and activating the huge chest crystal. Fortunately, Ves already took into account that he might have to downscale the chest crystal, so he easily modified the original design to accommodate much smaller crystals without overhauling the entire schematic. It only took a couple more days for him to verify the soundness of his changes in the simulations.

"I don't have the time to fabricate a physical copy and test the bronze and silver label variants for real."

He decided to dump the problem on the lap of the Production Department and let them fabricate the variants and bring them to the testing grounds on their own. If nothing surprising happened, both of his variants should be able to

pass muster. In that case, the LMC could submit the designs to the MTA for certification before putting them into production.

Due to his impending absence, Ves helplessly delegated a lot of the responsibility of bringing all three labels to the market to his subordinates. Inevitably, the board of directors would have a say in the decision making as well, though Ves planned to ram through a couple of new regulations that curbed their power even further.

Lawyers in the service of the Larkinson Estate drew up much of the LMC's articles of incorporation. In hindsight, Ves made a mistake by relying on these people to draw up the governance structure for his company. The lawyers made sure that minority shareholders such as the Larkinsons retained a measure of power without being too obvious.

"As much as they're family, I can't let them run the LMC in a way that runs counter to its mission."

Ves did not rely on the the Administrative or Legal Department to come up with the amendments. Pretty much everyone who worked there reported to Jake, who in turn was a Larkinson loyalist through and through. Putting them in charge of this matter would be like putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.

Instead, he consulted an external corporate lawyer based out of Bentheim behind the backs of his entire company. With the help of the corporate lawyer's advice, they managed to formulate some changes that patched the most egregious loopholes in the corporate charter.

In this way, even if Ves wouldn't be able to attend the board meetings, the rest of the board still wouldn't be able to decide on things willy nilly.

Chapter 405 Agen

In order to make sure the LMC wouldn't be wracked by rudderless leadership, Ves made it so that he could appoint an agent to make decisions on his stead on the board.

The only problem was he needed to appoint someone he could trust with an incredible amount of power. After all, the LMC was a growing multi-billion credit mech manufacturer with bright prospects. It only took one power-hungry madman to topple everything that he built in the past two years.

As Ves tried to wrack his brains for possible candidates, he started to get a headache. "Carlos would have been a perfect agent for me."

He knew his friend inside and out and knew that he didn't enjoy the backing of anyone else. As someone who benefited hugely under Ves, Carlos could certainly be trusted to value his interests over those of the other Larkinsons.

A significant shortcoming of Carlos was that he never excelled in any of the business courses, so he probably wouldn't be able to steer the LMC as well as Ves.

Naturally, a bigger problem was that the Mech Corps already snatched Carlos up along with a deluge of other low-ranking mech designers.

After he ended up in the clutches of the military, Ves hadn't received any word from Carlos since. His friend completely fell off the radar, which was to be expected.

The military took communications with the outside galaxy very seriously. Even taking the time to say hello to your parents through the galactic net could leak out an enormous amount of sensitive data to any eavesdroppers.

Thus, even remotely, Ves could not expect Carlos to be available to act as his agent.

"Who else can I turn to?"

As the temporary chairman of the board, his agent held the power of life and death over the LMC. That was really something that could not be belittled. Ves himself was too busy to revel in the amount of power and wealth at his fingertips, but that did not mean he was unaware of their deathly allure.

He mentally went through several candidates, but he found to his dismay that most of the people he knew shared a connection with the Larkinson Estate. Even Chief Cyril, who knew the most about mechs in the company outside of Ves, never hid his roots as a retainer.

After going through more than a dozen different names, Ves ended up with two possible candidates. Each of them possessed their own merits and shortcomings. If he picked the wrong person, the consequences for the LMC would be very dire.

The first candidate who Ves tentatively took into consideration was Melkor. Although he was a Larkinson as well, his youth and his inexplicable estrangement with the Mech Corps insured he didn't fall into the established factions of the Family.

"In a way, he's kind of a failure, or the Larkinsons would have never let go of him to serve as my bodyguard."

Putting Melkor in charge of the board, if only temporarily, would make it clear to the rest of the board that Ves still kept a pulse on what went on there. Melkor's possessed a firm but understated personality that would likely lead to a restrained atmosphere in the board. After all, from what Ves gathered from his cousin, Melkor brooked no nonsense.

The downside to putting a mech pilot in charge of the board was that Melkor knew nothing about designing mechs or conducting business. He possessed no relevant knowledge that allowed him to make informed decisions, or understand the topics being discussed in the meetings.

Another problem with Melkor was that he would have to put his foot down in front of their grandfather. Despite his job as a military advisor, Benjamin always took the time to be present at the board meetings. As the temporary chairman, Melkor should be able to hold more sway than their grandfather.

"Will Melkor be able to stand up to grandpa, though?"

That was a very pertinent question. Benjamin Larkinson enjoyed a vast amount of prestige in the Larkinson Family. Not only did grandpa work for the influential Ministry of Defense, he also used to be an expert mech pilot. Practically the entire younger generation of the Larkinsons worshipped him as one of their gods.

From what Ves gathered of Melkor, his cousin did not enjoy a close relationship with the rest of the Family. Neither did he seem like someone who revered their grandfather.

Still, Ves always had the sense that Melkor hid a lot about himself to everyone. He never showed anyone his true nature. His habit of wearing a big visor that covered the entire upper half of his face made it extraordinarily difficult to read his expressions.

In the end, Ves could never pin down where Melkor stood. He may be a disaffected Larkinson looking to spread his wings outside of the umbrella of the Family. He might also be hidden Larkinson loyalist who had secretly been assigned to keep an eye on Ves and push him in the right direction once in a while.

"I've already entrusted him with some responsibility. What does it hurt to add a little more to his plate?"

Ves already tasked Melkor with leading and expanding the Avatars of Myth. That reminded him to arrange some matters for his personal force as well. He

still needed to hear back from Captain Silvestra and make plans for expanding their fleet.

Compared to picking a mech pilot like Melkor, Ves found the alternative to be a little more attractive.

During the early stages of his business, Ves relied on Gavin and Calsie to do a lot of things on his behalf. As the LMC formally came into being and hired hundreds of professionals, the role these two former students played in the company became less and less. That did not mean that Ves had sidelined them entirely.

It was easy for Gavin to adjust change his role. Not only did he let Ves keep tabs on what the Marketing Department was up to, he also acted as his personal assistant in many other areas. If not for his current responsibilities and his strange opinions in some areas, Ves would have no qualms about appointing Gavin as his agent.

"Calsie might be a better choice."

She was a dutiful worker who possessed a deep understanding of the local issues. Ves always relied on her reports on the local situation to keep himself abreast of what went on in Cloudy Curtain.

Ves honed in on her law background. While that didn't turn her into an expert concerning mechs or business, she should be able to possess a sufficient understanding of the discussions in due time. She also wouldn't be vulnerable to clever wordplay or dirty tricks.

If Ves put someone like her in charge of the board, then she wouldn't flinch from anyone, including his grandfather. She would be able to understand very well how much power she held in her hands and how much responsibility Ves had thrust in her. Since she didn't possess any relationships with the other members of the board, he could trust her to avoid any favoritism.

"She's still awfully young though. She's also related to the Pioneers."

Calsie never hid her inclinations for the Pioneers, and believed that the LMC should seek for ways to collaborate with each other. Ves was not a fan of political entanglement.

He couldn't forget how the Pioneers revealed their true faces to him long ago.

Even if they turned a new leaf with their change in leadership, a leopard could hardly change its spots.

In this case though, it was not as if Calsie would be in a position to do a lot. It would be really obvious if she changed the direction of the company in a way that favored the Pioneers.

Instead, Ves worried more about her youth and lack of experience. Would she be able to handle the responsibility and stand up to a bunch of professionals who surpassed her in every aspect?

"She doesn't need to be an expert. She only needs to hold her ground."

To act as his agent meant it would be sufficient for Calsie to understand the broad strokes of every proposal.

Ves decided to go with Calsie instead of Melkor, because he thought that the influence of the Larkinsons was already bad enough. If she subsequently attempted to benefit the Pioneers, then at least they would be able to play as a counterbalancing influence within the internal politics of the company.

He activated his comm and called Calsie to his office. After a moment, she arrived at the top floor of the office and sat down on the other side of the imposing office.

"I have a job for you. I don't know if you are interested, but how does it sound like to take up the post of temporary chairman of the board?"

He subsequently explained the details of the job and what he expected of his agent. As expected, Calsie looked floored by the responsibility.

"I-I-I'm just a local girl. Boss, this job is way too big for me! I'm not qualified to be the chairman of anything!"

"Nonsense. The job isn't as hard as it sounds, and since you are taking charge in a temporary capacity, you don't need to know all the ins and outs. Still, I suggest you study some basic textbooks about mech design and how to run a mech business whenever you're off-duty. It's important for you to master the general gist of what goes on in the company."

Ves diminished the daunting nature of what it meant to be his agent by breaking it down into manageable chunks. She only needed to assume a limited amount of responsibilities at the start. Once her knowledge caught up, she could slowly expand the range of decisions she would be able to affect.

Naturally, Ves made it clear that she should never act in a unilateral manner in any proactive decisions. Basically, he wanted Calsie to act as a gatekeeper for every major suggestion proposed by others. Her job was to say no to any ideas that went against his interests.

"If you put it like that, the job doesn't sound so hard." Calsie's frown started to ease. "I still don't get it. Why me? Why not Gavin, or someone else you trust. Am I special in your eyes?"

She looked at him with a mix of bewildered accusation. Ves did not enjoy being stared at in that way, and quickly held up his hands.

"It's not that I trust you over anybody else, but out of every other candidate, you are the only one I know who doesn't work directly for anyone else. Your ties with the Pioneers is of little concern to me. You would be the only person on the board who comes from Cloudy Curtain. Maybe all that's needed to keep the LMC in the right direction is a local touch."

In the end, Ves had to put his faith into Calsie and hope she did not disappoint. To her credit, Calsie did not appear to be duplicitous in her loyalties, and Ves had a good feeling about her. After a little bit more persuasion, Ves managed to get her to agree to become his agent.

As Ves introduced her to her upcoming duties, Calsie quickly frowned when she got her hands on the amendments that Ves was about to propose at the next board meeting. "I can see why you want to close all of these loopholes, but the other directors are going to be pissed."

He shrugged. "I don't need to care about their opinions."

"Disaffected board members can do a lot of damage, you know. The worst thing that can happen is if they enter into an accord with your enemies or competitors."

"I already thought about that. In exchange for allowing these changes to come to pass, I'll agree to let the LMC issue a modest amount of dividends. I'll also throw in some stock to them so that they enjoy a direct benefit."

Bribing people always worked wonders. Ves mainly resorted to this method because he couldn't think of any other way to keep the board members somewhat on his side. After all, the amendments he was about to suggest would definitely impact their ability to influence the direction of the company.

After wrapping up the matters concerning the board of directors, Ves sent Calsie out of his office and worked through the list of things he needed to arrange.

"I still need to fabricate a couple of gold label Crystal Lords. I still owe a copy to the Oodis Mudriders, while the Avatars of Myth needs a bunch of them as well to form a strong nucleus of mechs."

Ves especially placed a lot of importance on the latter. It would be a shame for his own personal force to rely on inferior silver label products. Due to the

growth nature of the X-Factor, it wasn't efficient for the Avatars of Myth to get accustomed with mechs that Ves intended to replace with superior variants at a later date.

The only problem was that Ves lacked the time to fulfill the needs of a force that numbered at least 40 mechs.

"If I want to meet all of their needs, I'll have to fabricate at least ten gold label Crystal Lords and several more gold label Blackbeaks."

That sounded impossible to fulfill in a short amount of time. Even if he planned to quickly wrap up his other work and spend the rest of his days as a free man on fabricating the mechs, he shouldn't expect to finish more than four or five handcrafted mechs.

"The Avatars of Myth will have to make do with what they can get." He shrugged.

Chapter 406 Primacy

Ves had to arrange a lot of stuff before his impending departure. Over the next week, he accomplished a lot of things.

He held a board meeting where he introduced Calsie and rammed through a couple of changes in the corporate chapter.

He kept himself up to date with the Marketing Department's plan to roll out of the Crystal Lord models.

On some moments, Ves squeezed out the time to visit Lucky. His gem cat meowed weakly at him whenever he visited. It seemed that Lucky still needed a couple of months to get back into shape.

"I'll be going away soon. According to the regulations of the Mech Corps, I can't bring any possession along with me. You'll have to stay behind."

"Meow..."

"Just keep an eye on the Mech Nursery, alright? Hang around Calsie and Melkor if you can, and scare away anyone who issues threats to them. They're my two most influential agents and I can't have them succumb to any outside coercion while I'm away.

"Meow."

"I'll be sure to arrange for a steady supply of choice minerals and exotics. You'll never starve as long as the LMC exists."

"Meow..."

He hugged and played with Lucky for a couple of times, but he regretfully kept these tender moments brief.

"There's one more thing I need you to take care of." Ves said and slowly detached his trusty comm from his wrist. He subsequently bound it to Lucky's neck. The comm's advanced construction quickly shifted into a locked configuration. "Keep my comm on you at all times, and never let it anyone grab a hold of it. Got it?"

"Meow?"

"Yes, it contains the System."

"Meow!"

"I know, but I don't have any other choice! The Mech Corps take security very seriously. I heard that any incoming mech designer will be stripped of his possessions and be issued new ones instead. I can't have this comm falling out of my sight and into someone else's hands."

This not only applied to his comm, but also his shield generator and all of his anti-grav clothes, which he planned to stash in the vault.

Spending a long time without the System daunted him a little. Ves admitted to himself that he became dependent on having the possibility to spend DP at

any time to get out of a fix. Being forced to forgo his safety rope unsettled him more than he thought.

"I couldn't have made it this far without the System."

On the flipside, this would be a rare moment in time where he could prove that he could make do without the System's many conveniences. True mech designers built up their careers by themselves. Though many of the successful ones benefited from a lot of outside help, Ves figured that no one enjoyed a leg-up as much as him over the same period of time.

From a talentless hack to a rising young star, Ves owed the System more than he could ever repay. The thought constantly lingered in the back of his mind. One day, a reckoning might come where he may have to pay an awful price.

For now, it was not as if Ves lost a lot of capabilities. It would be impossible for him to earn a lot of DP while he worked for the Mech Corps.

"Added to that, the Crystal Lord is a Superpublished design. In exchange for elevating its quality, I lost the opportunity to earn any DP from its sales."

That would affect him a lot, he knew. The handsome trickle of DP he earned from the Blackbeak alone was very substantial. Once the LMC allocated some of its production capacity to the Crystal Lord, his DP income would be cut in half at the very least.

Therefore, losing access to the System for a time wouldn't affect him too much. This made it a little easier for Ves to stomach going without this aid.

For now, he made do with a generic comm that contained nothing important.

As he went through his to-do list, he also spoke with Captain Silvestra. She thought highly of the Trieste TRLC-343 light carriers. However, his suggestion to put her in charge of the starship contingent of the Avatars of Myth met a surprising objection from the female captain.

"Thank you for thinking so highly of me, sir, but I'm not qualified to hold a multi-ship command." She replied over the comm. "In both the mercantile and mercenary navies, it's something of a taboo to thrust a junior captain like me in a position of leadership over multiple fully-fledged ships. It takes decades of training and experience to become a senior captain or fleet commander. They are the only ones competent enough to keep track of multiple vessels and effectively command them in battle."

This posed a problem for Ves. "I don't know any senior captains and I don't know a thing about running a fleet. Can you assist Melkor in finding a good and trustworthy senior captain that can crew and run the two Trieste-class light carriers that I'll be ordering soon?"

"That won't be a problem." The captain of the Barracuda smiled. "I know a handful of former mentors who may be interested in commanding over a fleet of state-of-the-art light carriers."

The price tags attached to the Trieste-class vessels drained the majority of his personal fortune. In return, the Avatars of Myth gained an incredible amount of capability with regards to interstellar mobility and spaceborn battles.

The two purpose-built ships could not be compared to the deluge of cheap, clunky converted carriers which always risked coming apart at the slightest touch. These consisted of improvised rust buckets converted from outdated cargo haulers that had reached the end of their service. The only reason they had been made space worthy again was because the shipyards replaced the FTL drive and a handful of other essential parts during the conversion process.

Naturally, in the race to offer the cheapest converted carriers, the more dubious shipyards often cut a lot of corners. The amount of accidents these converted carriers suffered each year in the Bright Republic alone could fill up a book.

According to Captain Silvestra, fleet commanders with the right qualifications rarely accepted the invitation of a random mercenary corps to command their ramshackle ships. Attracting the services of these venerable spacers who enjoyed a supreme status in the mercantile and mercenary navies required a lot of effort.

"Hmm." Ves mused. "So will it be difficult for us to attract a qualified commander?"

"There's no problem at all. They all salivate at the possibility of commanding over two proper light carriers. In addition, working under a mech designer is a cushy job. Unlike working for a mercenary corps, you always seem to have a lot of money to spend, and you don't go out to dangerous regions nearly as often."

Many mech pilots thought the same. Ves understood her point after he made that connection. "While I'm gone, I'll be sure to set aside a lot of funds in order to crew and maintain the ships. Just to be sure, every major spending decision needs to be cleared by Melkor. He'll be having the ultimate say over everything that happens in the Avatars of Myth. Will that be okay?"

She nodded. "Sir, this is nothing unusual. The outfit commander's words are law. It's up to us ship drivers to bring his mechs to the right planet at the right time."

It used to be the other way around. Admirals, fleet commanders and ship captains with the power to scorch entire planets used to reign supreme. The so-called ground pounders that formed the landbound contingent of the armed forces often endured mockery and abuse by the elites that ran the warships.

Nowadays, the Age of Mechs placed mech pilots in a position of primacy. Outfits always pushed their mech commanders in a position of leadership. It was unheard of to let a ship captain be a figurehead, even if that person

commanded over a starship that was ten times as expensive as all the mechs in the outfit put together.

After his talk with the captain, Ves looked at his schedule and saw that he addressed every pressing issue. The only item on the agenda of importance was the upcoming press conference.

"For now, I should fabricate as much gold label Crystal Lords as possible."

In order to spice up the press conference, Ves planned to bring along a handful of gold label Crystal Lords and auction them after the grand reveal. Just the hint of it would attract a horde of collectors, thereby boosting his new product line's exposure.

His hard work in elevating the status of his gold label offerings allowed him to cash in on it at this crucial moment. A fair number of mech insiders knew that any product that carried this label would have an extraordinary amount of value. The X-Factor alone helped a lot in reinforcing their emotional impression of his mechs.

"I can always count on collectors being suckers." Ves smirked before he furrowed his brows. "Yet I can't base my business model around serving their demands."

Milking the cash cows known as collectors required a fertile field for them to feed on. Without building up the status of his regular production models, he had no leg to stand on if he wanted to charge a huge premium for his top-tier mechs.

Therefore, Ves and the Marketing Department did not count on collectors alone to hype the Crystal Lord. They needed to reach their intended market segment which would be responsible for the bulk of their sales.

"We've got to find a way to make our value proposition relevant to the private sector."

This was not a matter of delivering a certain amount of performance or including an innovative new gimmick. At the heart of it, mech designers like Ves produced machines of war that aimed to meet the needs of those who relied on them to do their jobs.

What kind of mech pilots did his mech appeal to the most?

The elites. The commanders. The talents. The Crystal Lord wasn't called a Lord for nothing. Both its price and performance elevated the model past most of its peers. Potential customers ranged from outfits that nurtured promising talents, or mech commanders that wanted to make a bigger impact on the battlefield.

The LMC's Marketing Department worked with this premise and started priming the local media environment with teaser ads of the new model. With the help of Marcella who knew the market inside and out, they found the best ways to spark some interest in the upcoming press conference.

All of this cost a lot of money, of course. The LMC already lost some cash by issuing dividends, and now it spent even more to fund an advertising campaign for a product that hadn't even been sold yet.

The increased spending delayed the acquisition of more production lines, but Ves believed his company would be better off in the long run by investing so early in marketing the Crystal Lord.

In the meantime, Ves slaved away his time by churning out mechs after mechs from the Dortmund production line. A constant rotation of mech technicians stood at a distance and observed his every move. They needed to learn how to fabricate a copy of the Crystal Lord on their own after Ves was gone.

Though the Crystal Lord used up less materials than the Blackbeak, its fabrication process was a lot more complex. From the HRF armor to highly intricate mechanisms, this mech required a lot of finesse.

At best, he could complete one Crystal Lord in a little more than two days. Perhaps over time, he and his mech technicians would become more familiar with the process, but the time savings wouldn't be too much.

"This is a mech that's difficult to mass produce."

Ves did not consciously design the Crystal Lord to be so troublesome to fabricate. The cramped volume and lack of space reminded him of his troubles with the Caesar Augustus and the Mark II. His vast experience with those two outdated designs taught him how to handle situations like this, but that did not mean his employees could go over these bumps as well.

"Being difficult to produce isn't necessarily a bad thing. At least it will cut down on the imitations."

Chapter 407 Farewells

Over the course of several weeks, Ves fabricated eight gold label Crystal Lords. Together with the first production model, the LMC would be able to show off nine of them at once at the looming press conference.

A while ago, Ves tentatively settled on holding the press conference in a couple of days. Though the announcement didn't leave much time for everyone else to arrange their schedules, he believed that a lot of people still planned to attend.

"Interest in our new model is has peaked." Gavin spoke as he reported the matter to Ves in his private office. "The teasers have done their job, but without showing anything more solid than a silhouette, it's extremely hard to generate new fans."

"We'll make do with what we have. How many confirmed guests are we talking about?"

"We've roped in over two-dozen local publications. None of them are major players, and only a couple of them have state-wide reach."

Ves frowned. "Nothing bigger has shown any interest?"

"No. We tried our best and even offered a substantial amount of bribes, but those huge publications that are followed by people throughout the Komodo Star Sector hardly pay attention to Apprentice Mech Designers. You have to be an extremely talented Journeyman Mech Designer in order to rouse their interests."

Though he found it disappointing, Ves did not expect anything else. It had already been an extremely rare occasion for a publication such as the Rimward Star Herald to do a feature on him. Even that got quickly ignored and buried underneath all of the major news that popped out shortly afterwards.

"Have you gathered any more intelligence about the second wave?"

"According to the latest rumors circulating in the mech industry, the Mech Corps has almost finished settling the first wave of mech designers. They'll likely call up the second wave early next week."

"Ves tapped his fingers. "Hm. I've done what I can in Cloudy Curtain. The Barracuda arrives in orbit tomorrow morning. We'll depart for Bentheim to prepare for the press conference. Make sure you finish everything that needs to be done on this end before you go."

"Will do, boss!"

As Gavin left his office, Ves contemplated how the LMC would fare in his absence. Right now, a lot of tiny mech workshops and mech boutiques

shuttered their doors by the thousands. Hardly a day went by without reading up on the doom and gloom among the tiny mech manufacturers.

These marginal companies only managed to cling onto solvency as long as their only mech designer remained in charge. The sudden absence of a vast majority of mech designers caused most of these businesses to shutter their doors, sometimes by the founders themselves.

This in turn disrupted plenty of supply chains and caused a deluge of unemployed people who used to work for these small mech manufacturers to end up on the streets.

Fortunately, the LMC remained steady throughout all the turmoil. With two currentgen product lines in its catalog, the company would be able to remain relevant for at least eight more years without any further input by Ves.

"This is a good time for my company to grow and accumulate more wealth."

Unless someone else published a design that competed directly against his mechs, the LMC should be able to sustain a regular cash flow. It mattered little whether Ves published more designs or not. His current two designs already covered a decent swathe of the market.

Ves spent his final day in Cloudy Curtain meeting his people one more time and saying goodbye to them. He even took a shuttle trip downtown and visited Dietrich to get in touch with the Whalers.

Ever since they helped out in repelling the Vesian raiding force, their prestige enjoyed a substantial boost. Their rule over Cloudy Curtain had solidified and couldn't be shaken anymore.

Dietrich obviously looked like he was having a good time. Ves entered a recently constructed night club that the Whalers had demolished and built from the ground up with all the bells and whistles. It made heavy use of wide-area projectors to cast an illusion of walking among the stars.

The view disoriented Ves somewhat, but he slowly got used to walking in the middle of space. Comets zipped by while stars emitted light and heat. He eventually reached Dietrich who nursed an expensive drink.

"Are you off to join the war?" He asked with a bit of alcohol on his breath.

"In a way. I'll likely be allocated to a design team."

"I heard about that! My mates tell me that they'll gather a hundred or so mech designers and put them in a single base in some forgotten corner of the Republic and let you guys sort things out from there."

"It's not quite as simple as that. Mech designers like me will be joining the existing design teams as extra manpower. They can never have enough mech designers to do all of their grunt work."

Most of the time, people like Ves would be granted the privilege of running loads of simulations or repetitive computations. Some jobs could be left to AIs while other jobs required a lot of creative judgement. Mech design was both an art and a science, after all.

Ves hoped that publishing the Crystal Lord design would enhance his status just enough to avoid the lowest level of grunt work. It remained to be seen whether the Mech Corps took note of his work, but it couldn't hurt to try.

Ves ordered a light drink and sat on the opposite side of the table to Dietrich, who dismissed his hanger-ons. As Ves enjoyed the imported liquor, he turned to an important topic.

"What's in store for the Whalers in the next few years? You guys are expanding like crazy. Cloudy Curtain alone won't be able to hold you all."

"Hahaha!" Dietrich burst into laughter. "It's that obvious? Well, since you already guessed, there's no need for me to hide. We're planning on branching out, but not in the way you think. All the neighboring star systems in the

Bentheim region is spoken for. The gangs who occupy these systems all have backers just as troublesome as Monty the Beheader. We can't just fob them off without provoking a lot of formidable existences."

"So you're looking for places further ahead?"

"Exactly! Right now, we're eying a quiet star system that's closer to Rittersberg than Bentheim, but not too close to make things difficult. You know what everyone is saying about this war. There's always a chance the Vesians might accomplish the impossible and conquer the Bentheim System. Having a few fallback options ready would be really handy."

"The chance that the Mech Legion actually manages to break through is small. They first have to crack Fort Havensworth before they can even think about moving further inward. That's never happened before."

Both of them nodded. Neither appeared to seriously entertain the thought of a Vesian upset. Walter's Whalers only made some preparations in order to calm the nerves of its own people.

"So what are you here for, really? I doubt you visited to sample our drinks."

Ves nodded and put down his half-empty glass. "In truth, I wanted to ask some favors from the Whalers. Basically, I want you guys to watch over the LMC and take care of them if it's convenient for you guys. I hope you can help my company out again if the Vesians for some reason try to raid the Mech Nursery again."

"That's difficult for me to promise, you know. We're in the middle of our transformation. Our combat effectiveness isn't all that great right now."

"At some point, your rookies will stop being inept. I'm confident the Whalers will become a force to be reckoned with. At that time, I hope you haven't forgotten about me and my company."

"That won't happen! You can count on us!"

They subsequently discussed more concrete matters. In exchange for explicit support, the LMC would occasionally supply the Whalers with silver label mechs. Though they could still afford to purchase these mechs at market prices, Dietrich never turned down free stuff, especially mechs of this caliber.

"Great! It's always troublesome to order a homegrown mech of yours. Sure, we can place our orders to another company, but we'll only be able to get our hands on the crappy bronze label mechs. Getting them directly from your factory will save us a lot of trouble!"

For the rest of the evening, Dietrich showed him around the newly erected bases erected by the Whalers. Gone was the stink, the rusting walls and overgrown ground. The new bases looked every bit as formidable as the smaller bases maintained by the Mech Corps.

Even if the Vesians returned in greater numbers, the Whalers would still be able to hold them off with these new bases.

The next day, Ves packed his luggage, which wasn't much, and boarded a shuttle to the temporary spaceport set up just outside of Freslin.

Strictly speaking, with the self-destruction of the old spaceport in Orinoco, Ves did not have to make this detour. He could have chosen to lift off into orbit directly from his doorstep.

It would be bad form to do so, though. Traffic heading up into orbit or down to the surface would become a chaotic mess without a spaceport acting as a central hub. They also played a vital role in inspecting ships and cargo for any untoward surprises.

Only smugglers and other criminals ignored spaceports. If Ves followed suit, he would be painted in the same brush as them. Therefore, Ves endured time being wasted on this side trip.

Once his shuttle finally lifted off into space and docked next to the Barracuda, Ves along with Gavin and a handful of key personnel boarded the corvette and made themselves at home.

"Set course to Bentheim and depart whenever you're ready."

"Aye aye, sir!" Captain Silvestra responded curtly from the bridge.

Ves headed up to the tiny observation room at the uppermost deck of his ship and looked down on the greyish globe that represented Cloudy Curtain.

He was leaving Lucky, the System, his shield generator, the Vulcaneye and his anti-grav clothes behind. Ves felt awfully vulnerable without these possessions.

Only the Amastendira remained by his side. The System granted Ves the option to store the high-grade laser pistol into his Inventory. Surprisingly, Ves was able to store and retrieve the Amastendira from the Inventory even without the System.

This was very good news to Ves. While he didn't expect to resort to the weapon at all, he still found it reassuring that he could count on at least one way to get out of a crisis.

The Barracuda quietly engaged her thrusters and joined the convoy of cargo haulers making for the nearest Lagrange point. Among other cargo, they also held eight of his Crystal Lords. The first production model had already reached Bentheim long ago and recently finished its validation trials.

There was no suspense at all. The Crystal Lord design passed with very high marks. The MTA even generously valued its licensing contract at 5 billion bright credits, which was 2 billion more than the Blackbeak!

The high value attached to its licensing contract would certainly help burnish its credentials. Right now, the MTA kept the news confidential to anyone but

Ves, but he could certainly imagine everyone's surprise the moment he revealed the sum.

"I'm not just an average Apprentice Mech Designer anymore." He smirked as he turned away from the view of the shrinking planet.

He already set his sights beyond the Crystal Lord. At this time, Ves thought about the years ahead of him. Mech designers never stopped learning. Getting drafted into a design team shouldn't be an excuse for him to stop his progression.

"Even without the System, I can still find a way to become a Journeyman Mech Designer."

With his abundant amount of Skills, Ves more than satisfied the knowledge requirement to advance to Journeyman.

The other two requirements set him back. He lacked experience in designing original mechs and he was still in the process of developing his design philosophy.

In a way, Ves could still work on those two requirements as part of a design team, but he could only do so if he was entrusted with greater responsibility.

"Mindless work won't cut it for me. I've got to be in a position where I can truly contribute to the designs in development."

Ves already imagined the challenges he would face. With Senior Mech Designers calling the shots, a junior like him possessed no status at all. Right from the start, he faced an uphill battle trying to earn everyone's acknowledgement.

"I'll see how I can proceed once I get there. I can't completely rely on second-hand stories to form my plan. I have to see how a design team is run with my own two eyes."

Chapter 408 Diminishing Confidence

Once they arrived at Bentheim, Ves and the people he brought along went to work. They booked one of the better convention halls in the center of Dorum to hold their second product this time.

It took a lot of effort to secure a booking on short notice. Coincidentally, a mech manufacturer that previously booked in the same period had shuttered its doors due to recent events.

"The ongoing war is making a lot of people concerned." Marcella explained as she met with Ves at the entrance of the enormous hall. "Business is going well for now, but a lot of influential people have started moving away from Bentheim."

That meant less customers and less demand. Ves hummed at the news. "Hm. Will it affect our opening?"

"You'll be seeing a lot less movers and shakers in the crowd. Instead, they're sending out their representatives. Therefore, take note in your presentation to who you are talking to. To reach the people holding all the money, you have to appeal to them through their reps."

The recent raids by the 3rd Imodris Legion terrified the entire Bentheim region. Magnates and wealthy families that contemplated moving out all pulled the trigger and left the volatile planet behind. This reordered the local power structure and disordered the local economy even further.

Still, despite all the doom and gloom pervading throughout the streets, life went on, and so did the mech industry. Press conferences continued to be held all the time for the mech designers that remained to introduce their new designs.

Not every mech designer got called up to serve. The Bright Republic knew that they would cripple their entire domestic mech industry if they did so. In

general, they left aside those who contributed enormously on their own and those who already served in the previous wars.

Thus, even if most of the younger generation of mech designers disappeared from the market, the mech industry as a whole would still be able to stay aloft.

As they toured the empty hall, Marcella began to explain the recent situation. "This is a time of war. Though most of the news is kept from the public, the Republic is extremely concerned about Lady Amalia's legion. She hasn't shown up since the raids and that's a huge concern. The threat she poses is a lot more damaging to our confidence than actually showing up to attack a star system."

"In other words, she's hanging the 3rd Imodris Legion over our heads like a sword of Damocles?"

"Exactly so. Some mech manufacturers are thinking of winding down, while others are starting to stockpile rare resources. Prices have gone up by ten percent since the raids."

This was only the start. As the war progressed, prices would continue to skyrocket, bankrupting over half of the mech manufacturers based in the Bright Republic. This happened in the previous war and the wars before that. Ves knew that his company was in better shape than most. He deliberately set a high profit margin on his products in order to absorb a substantial spike in costs.

He could afford to do so because the LMC exclusively produced premium mechs. Though Ves recently developed an ambition to enter into the ultra-cheap bulk mech market, he wouldn't be able to keep up with the razor-thin margins as of yet. His company wasn't geared to compete on that level yet.

They finished touring the hall and Ves nodded in satisfaction at the open spaces. A high-end convention hall like this not only provided ample space to

show off multiple mechs, it even offered a small-scale arena space to show off the live combat capabilities of their mechs.

Gavin met the pair near the arena. "Boss! This arena doesn't offer a lot of space, but the security screens are powerful enough to endure a full-powered blast from the Crystal Lord's chest laser! Why don't we hold a live duel?"

"A duel isn't the best way to showcase the Crystal Lord's strengths." Marcella retorted. "Just like the Blackbeak, the Crystal Lord is a mech that excels in battles of attrition. Let's not repeat the near-disastrous design duel that happened last time. The stakes are higher now."

The mech broker had a point. Laser rifleman mechs and the Crystal Lord in particular only showed their true value if they had time to wear down their opponents. Besides that, the arena barely provided a ranged mech like the Crystal Lord enough space to show off its mobility.

"This is the downside to booking a convention hall in the middle of the city. There are other halls in the outskirts that offer much more room to maneuver."

"Hm, what's done is done. We'll have a lot more trouble trying to attract people to attend our product reveal if we held it in the outskirts."

They decided not to display the prowess of their mechs in a duel. Instead, they planned to show off some of the features of the Crystal Lord through target practice and live demonstrations. The arena offered just enough space to do so safely.

Throughout the rest of the planning sessions, they also formulated how to conduct the rest of their product reveal. They needed to awe the crowd in more ways than one in order to justify the sticker price of their mechs.

Marcella laid out their priorities. "Our main job is to convince the crowd that the Crystal Lord brings enough value to the table to make the prices seem reasonable. Forget about the pricing schemes for the silver and gold label

mechs, the 65 million base price for the bronze label Crystal Lords will definitely be met with ridicule."

Getting laughed at would be the worst thing that Ves could face in the upcoming press conference. He worked hard to earn some credibility in the business. Botching this presentation would ruin all that he worked for and land the LMC in a difficult position.

As they drew up some concepts and brainstormed some ideas to illustrate the Crystal Lord's appeal, a siren started to ring outside the streets. Their comms quickly started beeping in unison.

"It's an alert!"

"Are we under attack?!" Ves quickly asked.

"No." Marcella quickly shook her head. She was much more familiar with the local sirens than Gavin and Ves. "This is the secondary alert. It means that a star system nearby is being attacked at this very moment. The sirens are meant to bring us up to readiness in case the attack spills over to the Bentheim System."

Everyone turned grim at the news. "Is it the 3rd Imodris Legion?"

They all checked the news on their comms. "Information is scarce. The Republic is keeping a tight lid on the news. All they are saying is that the Coscos System is facing the combined might of two spaceborn mech regiments."

"The Coscos System!" Ves uttered in shock. "Isn't that the place where most of the high-grade fuels are refined?"

Marcella nodded. "It hosts a vital strategic fuel refinery works that processes the rare materials from several rich gas giants. It's essential to the Mech Corps and they are usually guarding it tightly."

"Perhaps. But will it be enough to repel two Vesian spaceborn mech regiments at once? And what is the rest of the 3rd Imodris Legion doing?"

The worst possible news could be that this might all be a distraction for a larger move. This was why Bentheim sounded out those sirens. The authorities tasked with guarding them didn't have a clue where the Vesians struck next.

"Don't fret too much, Ves. The Vesians don't have the numbers to threaten Bentheim. The odds of an attack here is rather minimal. Without spaceborn mechs, the remainder of the legion can only strike lightly-defended planets with only a basic garrison of spaceborn mechs."

Ves already knew that. He fretted not because he thought that Cloudy Curtain happened to form one of those lightly defended systems. If Lady Amalia chose to do so, she could easily send out an entire regiment to overwhelm the rural planet's feeble mechs and turn all of its industries into ash and smoke.

The only reason why he hadn't fallen into a full-blown panic was because he knew that Cloudy Curtain was too small-time for the Vesians to bother to commit to such an attack. It didn't make too much sense to risk an attack on a planet that hosted only a single medium mech manufacturer.

They spent a couple of hours in relative silence. Ves and the rest of the workers continued to plan out their press conference, but they toned down some of the fanfare. It would be in poor taste to hold an upbeat press conference right after a major attack.

News began to trickle out after more than half a day of silence. The Vesians had been repelled, but some of the refinery complexes that orbited the gas giant suffered grievous damage.

The Mech Corps muffled everything else. No one knew how many refineries sustained damage and whether the Republic could salvage them in a short amount of time.

Though the Bright Republic sourced its fuels from many sources, the Coscos System happened to be one of the biggest and most developed site due to its proximity to the Bentheim System. Crippling it would certainly disrupt the supply of fuels to mechs and ships.

This was bad news for Ves and the LMC, as both of their product lines ran on fuel instead of energy cells.

"The demand for fuel-based mechs won't collapse overnight." Marcella consoled Ves. "It might be a little more difficult than usual to convince buyers to opt for your mechs, but this is a temporary condition."

The Bright Republic wasn't stupid. Even though it invested heavily in the refineries at the Coscos System, they established many smaller refineries in other star systems. Furthermore, they also spent a substantial sum to import them from states blessed with an abundance of fuels.

Ves kept up with the news even after they finished the planning session. At night, he stayed up late browsing the news portals for any scrap of information they could squeeze out.

The news sounded pretty bad, but at least it hadn't gone worse. The Bright Republic estimated it could bring back its refineries to full capacity within half a year. Of course, this only held up if the Vesians didn't attempt to strike them again.

In order to guard against another attack, the Mech Corps quietly considered whether they should allocate some of their forces to the Coscos System.

Through news like this, Ves understood what the 3rd Imodris Legion was really after. "They weren't serious in destroying the fuel refineries at Coscos.

They want to exploit the current shortcomings in the defensive strategy opted by the Mech Corps."

This wasn't anything complicated. The Mech Corps could never spare the mechs and manpower to defend every desolate star system that fell within the Republic's borders. Instead, they chose to concentrate their mech regiments in a handful strategic star system, and deployed some of their forces to reinforce a nearby star system that fell under attack.

There was much to be criticized about this lackluster strategy. Though well-defending systems like Bentheim enjoyed an abundance of protection, many other star systems like Cloudy Curtain needed to rely on gangs or a handful of volunteer militia to keep out the troublemakers.

Reinforcements often came late or not at all. In the previous wars, many star systems burned due to the lacking response of the Mech Corps.

Still, as bad as it sounded, adopting other strategies would inevitably lead to worse outcomes. The danger of spreading out forces increased the odds of letting them be defeated in detail. It would be trivially easy for the Vesians to concentrate their invasion fleets and stomp the inadequately defended star systems one by one.

The Mech Corps constantly grappled with this recurring dilemma, and even though they sustained a lot of criticism over the years, they never budged from their stance.

It was not as if they resigned themselves to be a punching bag. During the previous wars, they sometimes raided the Vesian star systems in return, thereby exploiting the same gaps in their defenses.

Still, that had nothing to do with him. All Ves should be concerned about at this moment was to find a way to push his product onto the market.

"In two days, the market will get to know of my new product."

Chapter 409 Military-Industrial Complex

On the day the LMC unveiled the Crystal Lord design, the tense situation in the Coscos System cast a shadow over Bentheim. Underneath the grey, overcast streets of Dorum, fewer people walked by as everyone worried about their jobs, their safety, and whether the Republic could repel the Vesians yet again.

Ves looked down on the streets from Marcella's office.

"The public is getting more uncertain these days." He spoke. "The Bright Republic fought against the Vesia Kingdom for how many times? And never have we succumbed to their onslaught."

"There's always a fluke. The Vesians might have called up an ally, or the Mech Corps may have screwed up at some point. You know the Vesian nobles keep trying to invade the Republic because they hope they'll eventually get it right and blow past our defenses."

That was the awful thing about living in a state entangled in a generational war. The only reason why the Vesians haven't permanently instituted a state of war against the Brighters was because they didn't have the resources to sustain their aggression.

"Did you fight in the previous war?" Ves suddenly asked. "You obviously haven't started out as a mech broker."

The woman shrugged. She softly caressed her artificial limb. "I took part in the previous war, aye. It's not a pleasant experience and I don't really want to talk about it. I was too young back then. Young and stupid. I still needed five more years to graduate from the mech academy, but the Republic instituted accelerated training programs that attempted to cram everything we needed to learn into a span of only two years."

Ves understood. When the war dragged on and pilots began to grow scarce, the Republic tended to scrape up the young and the old.

These days, it took eight years to turn a fresh potentate into a barebones mech pilot, but they could barely pilot an industrial mech in the basic academies.

In order to gain more advanced fighting skills, the mech cadets also needed to spend some years at an advanced academy. The most well-rounded programs often ran for six years. Therefore, the best and most qualified graduates spent at least fourteen precious years in the academies.

They not only learned how to pilot a mech, but also how to work as a team and how to kill an enemy mech. At the advanced academies, they stopped learning the basics of each mech archetype but chose to specialize in a single role to their utmost.

Practically every state in the human-dominated parts of the galaxy adopted this mech training model. It originated from the galactic center where first-class mechs would also be extremely complex to pilot, but it spread out to the rest of the galaxy as academies in poorer star sectors lacked the resources to provide effective teaching.

Marcella continued her story. "In truth, I only experienced the end of the last war. They put a handful of prematurely graduated mech pilots like me into battle-scarred units where the only mech pilots who survived are those who are the toughest and most resilient men and women I have ever met."

"Did you enjoy your time with them?"

"I sure did. Most of my friendships today can be traced back to my service time. Those who survived formed a bond. We fought and watched each other's back even as missiles rained down on us and took out a hapless colleague. They taught us not to blink and keep on marching forward."

"Your luck must have ran out at some point."

"Yup. It happens to the best of us. The war began to wind down at that stage. The planet we fought over was bombed to hell and back. There was hardly any area in sight where the soil hasn't been disturbed by passing mechs or spent ordnance. Just when I thought I could make it through the end, the Vesians pulled off their final offenses. I barely got into the cockpit of my mech before a surprise attack punched right through the chest of my machine. That was the closest to death I've ever been."

Ves could imagine the horror of getting your cockpit breached by a mech-scaled weapon. "You survived, obviously."

"I was one of the lucky ones. Supplies ran short and the doctors became overwhelmed by the sheer amount of wounded that poured into their treatment facilities. Did you know that mechs are horribly lethal? Anyone facing a mech directly in battle will rarely get away unscathed unless they have their own mechs. It takes many tons of armor to endure a casual attack by a mech."

Both of them fell silent after that. As a young man who never experienced the previous war, he only heard about its horrors from the second-hand stories his aunts and uncles were fond of repeating.

Naturally, most young kids at that age hardly understood the cynicism acting as an undercurrent to their tales. Kids like Ves only focused on the glory and heroics of piloting mechs.

Now that he grew older, Ves felt a little more ambivalent about war. He disliked it, but as someone who designed and sold mechs for a living, his entire business model revolved around conflict.

Without war, who needed mechs?

"Sounds like it hasn't been a pleasant experience for you. Why did you enter the mech broker business then?"

"Well, my ability to pilot a mech has fritzed up due to the wounds I suffered back then. Due to the backlog of wounded, by the time a medical bot arrived at my side, I lost the opportunity to regrow my arm. I didn't understand the weird the science stuff the stupid bot spoke out, but I knew by then that more than ten years of my life is wasted. Think about it. What was I supposed to do with all my years of learning how to pilot mechs?"

"So you continued to get involved with mechs, just in a different way."

Marcella nodded. "After the war, everyone tried their best to forget what happened. The new generation of mechs swept through the galaxy and people needed to make sense of the new designs that rolled out of the mech factories. That's where people like me come in. Just because I can't pilot them anymore doesn't mean my mind has turned stupid. I studied under a mentor at first. I learned all of my business acumen from him. After that, I branched out on my own."

"Mechs have a way of persisting." Ves remarked with a rueful smile. "Now that I think about it, there are many possible careers for veterans such as you to pursue. There is still life after war."

"A lot of mechs get trashed after the war. Salvagers eagerly strip the battlefields and recycle them down into usable resources. Together with the onset of the new generation of mechs, everyone wants better mechs. It's become somewhat of a clockwork pattern for us."

"Ah?" Ves picked up a doubtful tone in her voice.

"It's as if there is a conspiracy behind it all. There's this thing called the military-industrial complex. You heard of it, right?"

"Sure I did, but people always tell me there's no truth behind it. The military-industrial complex is a silly conspiracy theory!"

"Are you sure about that?" Marcella pointedly asked. "You might be thinking that you've joined the big boys now that your mechs sell by the hundreds every month, but you're still a small-time player to the true rulers of the Republic."

"Even if they exist, it's not as if they can do anything about the Vesians. At the heart of it, it's the Vesians who are constantly prodding for war."

Marcella pointed her finger at him. "That's because their version of the military-industrial complex is a lot more simpler than ours. They don't even bother to hide in the shadows. What do you think those greedy nobles are really after? Do they want to help the royal family conquer the Bentheim System? Hah! Even if they lost millions of men and many thousands of mechs, they still accomplished their goals! The Vesians aren't out to conquer our territory in the first place!"

That came as something of a surprise to Ves. For what reason drove the Vesians into such a persistent pattern of war against the Republic? "What's their true goals then."

"They want to cling onto their power! Just think about it. Without war, how much of our populations would explode over time? Every planet would become an unlivable mess after a hundred years or so of uninterrupted growth. Even with the boundless amount of planets in the galaxy, it's too expensive to settle them all!"

What Marcella said sounded vaguely familiar to Ves. "Isn't this one of the justifications people bandy about when they question the MTA and CFA's role as protectors of the human race?"

As the two most powerful trans-galactic organizations, they potentially held the power to end all internal conflicts throughout human-occupied territories.

However, just because they held the power to stop all wars didn't mean it was a good idea to do so. From what Ves heard about the two powerful organizations, they lacked the confidence to impose a unified human order over so many star sectors.

"Is the MTA and CFA in on it?" Ves asked.

"Sure! Why not? They know as well as we do that too many humans are born each year. By the time I end this sentence, another billion or trillion or so babies are born right at this moment. The other alien races liken us as locusts who only know how to reproduce, and I can say they hit the nail on the head. With the growth rates maintained by every state, it's inevitable for planets to become cramped."

"Therefore, states needed to engage in war in order to cull their population?"

It sounded excessively brutal and needlessly convoluted to Ves. "Why not lower the birth rate?"

"Haha!" Marcella laughed. "That's easy to do, but would any state want to? It's fiendishly difficult to crank up the growth rate after generations of cultural brainwashing. And besides, it doesn't help if only a single state institute these kinds of restrictions. Their neighbors will quickly swell in population and manpower and treat them like a poor and easily exploitable territory."

"How does this relate to the so-called military-industrial complex?"

"Well, the most powerful authorities of our race have collectively decided that mechs are good and need to be spread as far as possible. Wars between states form the most convenient way to sell a lot of mechs, and curb the excessive growth in people as well! This exists in every layer of human society, from the galactic level to the level of an individual state. No matter

how big of a scale the complex turns out to be, they all want to profit out of death and misery."

It sounded like villainous aspiration, but Ves felt like they made the right decision. The top influences that held sway over human society reigned the fate of their entire race. They could not be soft-hearted nor show any weaknesses to the aliens that lingered at their borders.

The military-industrial complex actually sounded like a bunch of people that Ves could get along with. Where could he sign up?

Marcella read the look in his eyes and signed in disappointment. "You're a mech designer, so of course you take their side. All I can say is that you'll definitely change your tune by the end of this war. It's going to be a very long slog and there will be plenty of times when you get to witness the devastating consequences of war."

"I'm not a sheltered person, you know. I've witnessed first-hand how far a battle can go. I'm also a Larkinson. I've heard many tales about the previous wars."

Ves and Marcella didn't quite see eye to eye on this issue. Mechs gained prominence over four-hundred years ago and would continue to be relevant for centuries to come. Designing mechs and selling them was a noble profession in these times.

"When you step up to the podium this afternoon and show off your new creation, think about what you are introducing to the market. Will your mech be used to destroy, or to defend? You are responsible for how your war machines will be put to use. The blood that your customers are spilling with the help of your creations will inevitably stain your own hands."

Ves tried hard not to think too much about the misuses of his products. Ever since Vincent Ricklin took his Marc Antony Mark I and laid waste to the upper

echelon of his own family, Ves stopped paying attention to what his customers did with his mechs.

He only provided the mechs to those that needed it. His responsibility for his mechs ended as soon as they arrived in the hands of his customers.

"I think the crowd will eagerly wish to own a copy my new mech."

Chapter 410 Moment of Truth

Ves left Marella's office and boarded an armored shuttle that conveyed him towards the convention hall. Along the way, he tried but couldn't quite get Marcella's words to disappear from his mind.

On a whim, he activated his comm and performed a few casual searches on the galactic net.

The cursory search revealed a statistic that Ves had always overlooked.

"Casualties as a result of collateral damage?"

He knew what collateral damage meant. Backlash against it arguably ended the Age of Conquest, which some people referred to as the Age of Warships. With the onset of the Age of Mechs, mass extinction and widespread slaughter ceased to happen, but that didn't mean it stopped happening entirely.

Missile barrages notoriously inflicted wide swathes of devastation. With the effectiveness of ECM these days, over eighty or ninety percent of missiles never hit their targets. Instead, they veered away and flew a bit further before exploding upon the first obstacle they came across.

Many cities hollowed out and collapsed this way.

Cannons also frequently pled guilty to this, but surprisingly the humbler laser rifle took the crown. Their ubiquity, availability and low cost per discharge meant that mech pilots who piloted laser rifleman mechs frequently showered their opponents with laser beams.

Ballistic rifleman and railgunner mechs exercised much stricter trigger discipline because they couldn't afford to waste their ammunition.

Therefore, Vs got a completely different conception of laser rifleman mechs. Who knew that the humble straight and narrow laser beams actually resulted in more deaths and collateral damage than more explosive weapons?

"This is mainly the fault of the mech pilot."

If these laser-happy mech pilots exercised the same trigger discipline as their ballistic and kinetic counterparts, they wouldn't let this statistic balloon.

"This isn't my responsibility."

By now, over a thousand Blackbeak mechs circulated throughout the Bright Republic and elsewhere. Ves did not keep tabs on what their pilots did. Someone could have crashed their mech through a school full of children and Ves wouldn't know. Even if he did, what did it have to do with him?

"People don't blame a shuttle manufacturer if some madman took their shuttle, hacked all the safeties, and crashed it into office building."

The only reason he would check up on his products was to see whether their X-Factor aged and developed unique flavors. Right now, it would be too early to tell, so Ves planned to wait a couple of years before performing an in-depth study of the effects.

Once the shuttle arrived at the convention hall, Ves went inside and oversaw the final preparations of the product reveal. This time, the LMC went for a more elaborate concept that transformed the entire hall into a projected battlefield. It all looked impressive and lifelike as Marcella's brokerage supplied the advanced equipment to turn illusion into a hyper-realistic simulations.

The experience went beyond spectacular visuals. Ves felt the vibrations from the footsteps of a Crystal Lord as it walked by. He could hear the sharp tang of a laser rifle discharge as another projected mech fired its weapon at a distant enemy mech.

For the battlefield, they picked out a sprawling ruined urban landscape. Rubble and debris littered much of the abandoned city, as months of fighting turned every street into an unlivable mess.

"This is what happens after every battle."

Seeing the awful state of the buildings and the remains of abandoned vehicles strewn about put everyone present in a somber mood. In light of the recent attack on the Coscos System, Ves opted to color his presentation in a serious tone. He nixed the original plan which involved excessive cheer and exuberance.

Not everyone supported this last-minute style change, but Ves knew that they needed to be tactful in order to avoid public condemnation.

"Are all the props and projectors in place?"

"We installed and tested every prop yesterday. Everything works as planned, boss." Gavin answered as he studied a data pad that contained all of their planning. "All nine mechs are shipped in place as well, with the first production model standing in the place of honor."

"How about the permits? Did we receive permission from the convention hall and the authorities to activate all nine mechs?"

"We only managed to do so after Marcella's brokerage greased the wheels. It's harder than usual for the LMC to do business in Bentheim because we aren't based here. We only have a branch office that's in charge of marketing and after-sales support, and it's too small for us to cultivate important

relationships with the people in power. If not for Marcella's deep connections, we wouldn't have been able to get away with this plan."

Ves nodded as if he expected the outcome. As the LMC grew up from a one-man operation into a medium mech manufacturer, he gradually realized that many rules could be overcome with a sufficient amount of power and influence. Nothing was impossible, and only very few rules turned out to be absolute.

While the prohibition on activating mechs was a very sensible one to limit the chances of disaster in the middle of a densely-populated city, too many people flouted these rules and got away with it. "It's like an unofficial tax."

A few hours went by as Ves prepared and rehearsed his presentation. He couldn't delegate the responsibility of introducing the Crystal Lord design to anyone else. Mech designers needed to show their pride at their own products. Therefore, even if he wasn't the best public speaker in the company, he readily accepted the responsibility.

In the meantime, the entrance to the hall opened up and let in the first attendees. The journalists and representatives of various publications and organizations arrived first. They blinked past the omnipresent projections of the ruined urban landscapes and the silhouettes of the new design skulking in the shadows and claimed their preferred spots to record the upcoming press conference.

Batches of collectors arrived next. Some of them previously showed up to the Blackbeak's reveal event as well, but for many of them, this would be the first time they got to see Ves up close.

The mech industry as a whole started to take note of the LMC due to the spread of the Blackbeaks. While the poorest mercenary corps eschewed the

expensive models entirely, many of the better-off outfits started to take a shine on the models.

It came in three slightly different flavors with varying levels of pricing and availability, so everyone with money could take their pick. As these influential forces started using the Blackbeaks, their benefits became evident as well.

Besides their performance, the Blackbeaks also became renowned for their ability to accommodate mech pilots particularly well. Whether in terms of ergonomics or the elusive 'feel', the Blackbeaks stood out for their excellence in making pilots feel as comfortable as if they returned to their mother's wombs.

Now, with the rumored introduction of a second model which inherited most of the traits of the Blackbeak, some of the industry insiders wanted to see what the fuss was all about. As they milled forward and took their seats, they started guessing what the LMC had in store for them. This time, news of their development hadn't leaked out, which was a minor accomplishment in itself.

"You're up in five minutes." Gavin reminded Ves as the hall became increasingly packed.

"I know. I'm ready to go at any moment."

"Be careful of the hecklers in the crowd. Since we opened our doors to bystanders, you can bet on getting challenged on the spot."

The massive convention hall would appear to be too empty if they held the press conference in front of a modest gaggle of invited guests. In order to make the reveal event appear more successful, they advertised the event to the people walking past the convention hall. Anyone could enter for free once they registered their identities.

Despite the gloom on the streets, they managed to fill up the hall just enough to make the place seem packed. Naturally, it also led to a bit of chaos as bored teenagers and crying babies added to the noise.

They quieted down once a massive projection appeared that introduced the LMC and its recent history. The introduction was meant to build up some hype before the actual event.

Moments later, someone sent a signal to Ves. "That's my cue."

As Ves appeared on the podium, a modest round of applause rang out. He confidently strolled to the front and beheld his audience. "Welcome to the Living Mech Corporation's second product reveal. As the founder and chief designer of the LMC, it is my mission to offer people like you the option to purchase a mech that's different."

He extended his hands which caused a life-like silhouette of the Crystal Lord to loom behind him. The mech was no projection this time, but an actual physical copy piloted by a real mech pilot. Clever use of lighting caused the mech to be obscured to the point where the audience couldn't spot its laser rifle.

The mech hadn't even revealed its visage, but already the crowd became subjected to a formless pressure that originated from its X-Factor.

"Our new design is an extension of the philosophy that underpins the Blackbeak. Much like the knight design, our latest offering is a tough, enduring and well-balanced machine. After months of development, we have managed to succeed in designing a mech that translates all of these strengths into a different archetype."

"Is it another knight mech?" Someone from the press suddenly asked out loud.

Ves smiled at the reporter. "It is not. While the LMC is known for its history of publishing knight designs, we are not exclusively focusing on a single type of mech. Instead, our latest design adopts a very different role on the battlefield. I am sure that you will be astounded by the features we've packed into our latest design."

Ves meandered a little with his speech as he talked around his new design without revealing it. Anticipation built up in the crowd as they got entranced by his words. It didn't help that their surroundings grew increasingly busy as the simulations took to life by depicting a lifelike battle.

"We at the LMC are committed to offer our customers an alternative to the dominant models of the market. We pride ourselves to delivering quality and uniqueness. Rather than tread the path of my colleagues, our next design is sufficiently distinct that we can say with some confidence that nothing like it has ever been released in the Komodo Star Sector!"

Everyone's anticipation had reached the peak. Ves quickly watched for cues from Gavin who stood unobtrusively at the side. His assistant passed on a signal that indicated that he already spent more than enough time on sidestepping around the main event.

Ves bowed and moved on with the revelation of his new design. "Introducing our first range of rifleman mechs, the Crystal Lord!"

Lights banished the darkness obscuring the frame. For the first time in history, the Crystal Lord entered into the view of the public.

Gasps sounded out as everyone beheld the unusual-looking design.

"It's a rifleman mech! Medium weight class, armed with a laser rifle, carrying an external backpack module."

"What a small and compact laser rifle! It's as small as the rifles wielded by light mechs!"

"Look at those sleek curves. This is a mech that's optimised for speed. How fast can it run?"

"It's not only fast, but tough as well. Look at the texture of that mottled brown exterior. That's the same compressed armor utilized in the Blackbeak design."

"What? The LMC put knight armor onto a rifleman mech design? How crazy is that!"

"I don't know what this mech does, but I absolutely want a copy no matter the cost!"

"Me too!"

The guessing game started immediately upon the reveal. Everyone's first impressions was tinged with shock. They felt shocked not only because of its unusual traits, but also because the X-Factor continued to influence their impression of the mech.

It was as if they admired the statue of a god. The Crystal Lord somehow inspired a lot more awe and worship than other mechs.

Ves discretely smiled as he watched the effect play out in front of his eyes.