

Chapter 411 Shocking Design

"Wait a second! What's that huge transparent material embedded into the chest?"

"That looks like a glass-like composite. Is that a cockpit window or something?"

"Don't be ridiculous! This mech is obviously built to fight. Incorporating windows in those kinds of mechs is one of the stupidest things you can do!"

The chest crystal sparked another round of speculation. Ves let the crowd go on for half a minute before he resumed his speech.

"Introducing the first generation in the Crystal Lord product line, the CL-A-01 is exquisitely designed to meet the needs of the men and women who are burdened with defending the Bright republic for years on end. It's a mech designed to last for ages, and is designed from the ground up to maximize its longevity."

Ves spent the next ten minutes going over the basic specs of the mech. He showcased its speed, which was very important for all mobile rifleman mechs. He also reintroduced the Veltrex armor system and its particular properties that made the Crystal Lord a lot more resilient than many other rifleman mechs.

Naturally, he also couldn't forget about the crystals.

"On top of the amazing level of performance offered by our design, the Crystal Lord also makes use of a feature derived from technology recovered from alien ruins. Let me introduce to you the benefits of the two crystals embedded into each copy."

The Crystal Lord at the front unarched its back a little, giving the crowd a better view of the giant diamond-like crystal.

"The crystal at the chest is not a decorative component. It is a core weapon in the Crystal Lord's kit that delivers a powerful blow under certain circumstances."

As Ves laid out its properties, someone at the crowd rudely yelled out. "What nonsense is this?! Absorbing energy attacks? Shooting them back out? This is just another useless gimmick that's only good for marketing!"

Ves did not take offense at the latest hackler. Instead, his smile turned into a grin. "Seeing as how many of you are skeptical, why not witness it in action? We have prepared a secure stage where you can see this feature in action with your own two eyes."

The Crystal Lord walked towards the arena stage that's been cordoned off since the start of the reveal. The audience eagerly approached the sides of the arena and milled close.

Opposite to the original Crystal Lord stood another copy. Once both mechs took their places, one of them started winding up its laser rifle and began to fire a high-powered laser beam that burned for seconds at a time.

The more knowledgeable people among the crowd looked impressed.

"Look at the power behind that beam! That's not what you see every day from a rifle that size!"

"Is this laser rifle really a light model? Many medium-sized laser rifles don't pack that much of a punch!"

"Hey, instead of watching that rifle in action, why not look at the mech that's being hit. Its armor is still unscathed!"

At this distance and with both mechs standing still with their ECMs turned off, it was impossible for the shooter to miss. Every laser beam landed squarely

against the crystal, which sustained minimal damage but instead devoured every bit of energy sent in its way.

The level of absorption demonstrated by the Crystal Lord only applied to the gold label versions of the mech. The chest crystals needed to be really large and activated by the crystal cube before it could withstand the full might of a full-powered laser rifle.

Furthermore, only hits directly to the chest and onto the crystal would have their damage negated. Any laser beams that glanced to the lower chest or the neck and shoulders would only have a fraction of its energy negated.

No matter the truth, Ves would be a fool to inform the crowd of those shortcomings. He wanted to introduce his new design in the best possible light, so he regarded this product reveal as selling a fantasy.

"As you can see, the chest crystal is capable of tolerating high amounts of energy damage and can absorb them inside as well. If you look at the readouts to the side, you can clearly see that we haven't curbed the power output of the laser rifle in any way. What you are seeing right now is what the new custom laser rifle for the Crystal Lord can output in a sustainable manner!"

"Where can we buy this rifle? It's lighter and more powerful than anything I've seen!"

Ves laughed a little. "We have no plans to produce and sell a standalone laser rifle except to replace a broken sample. This weapon works best with the Crystal Lord, which is highly tailored to this specific rifle model."

"How come this rifle is so powerful?"

"That's because we incorporated a smaller version of the Crystal Lord's chest crystal into the mechanism of the rifle. Its many wondrous properties allow us to substitute much of the conventional components that add a lot of bulk to the

rifle. It's smaller and lighter, but still delivers the same amount of damage of a full-sized rifle."

As Ves elaborated on the crystals, the chest crystal quickly reached its saturation point. It could no longer continue to absorb more energy.

"Don't think this crystal is limited to absorbing energy. What comes in must also come out."

To illustrate his point, the saturated crystal instantly discharged a thick white beam against a target prepared to the side. The white beam burned through multiple layers of armor plating, demonstrating the awesome power behind the cannon-like beam in a direct fashion.

"That power!"

"Look at the energy readings! It's more powerful than a laser cannon!"

"Hah! More powerful, but is it useful enough? Don't forget that the crystal absorbed a lot of laser beams. How many mechs will stand still on the battlefield and how many enemies will conveniently aim at their chests? I stand by my words! This is nothing more than a marketing gimmick!"

Some people still remained sober, to which Ves could do not against. It wasn't as if they distorted the truth. The utility of the crystal was much less than what the mechs depicted.

Still, the overall reaction of the crowd looked encouraging. Ves still managed to sell the idea that the crystals held a lot of utility.

Ves walked back to the podium. The two mechs in the arena followed suit, as did seven other identical mechs.

A strange effect emerged as nine gold label Crystal Lords stood side by side as if they made up a single cohesive squad of mechs. Ves used this trick before and back then he already managed to shock the crowd into silence.

This time, the X-Factor in his design had reached another level. Although Ves wasn't sure of the difference, he knew that it would definitely deliver a bigger impact on the crowd. Multiple auras blended together and amplified each other. Some of the people rubbed their eyes, while others forgot to blink as they stared at the nine exquisite mechs.

It was as if the Crystal Lords came to life. They collectively radiated a sense of pride and threat. Their dark coloring and strange head shapes added to the sense of mystery behind these mechs.

"The Crystal Lord is more than a product. It is a mech. Not just any mech, but one that will grow on you. This is a mech that can be a lifelong companion to any mech pilot looking to invest in their future."

The projections around them started to depict the Crystal Lord in battle. The simulations crafted a vision where the Crystal Lord endured constant battles, only to be patched up and sent back into battle again. The sequence highlighted its robust construction and its resilience against wear-and-tear and the test of time.

The battles also showcased the fights that best suited the Crystal Lord. It excelled in longer engagements and was suitable to be used in extended deployments.

"We hereby announce the Crystal Lord is available to order from this moment onwards. At the end of this press conference, five of our exclusive gold label Crystal Lords will be auctioned out. The silver label versions of this mech will immediately begin production, but take note that supply is very limited for the time being. Bronze label Crystal Lords will soon enter the market after we have completed negotiations with the appropriate third-party manufacturers."

Sensing the end of the presentation, the crowd and in particular the press started bombarding Ves with questions.

While Ves could have opted to leave the stage, he chose to remain and answer the questions. Despite the risk of facing difficult questions, answering them increased the Crystal Lord's exposure.

"Your new design sounds very impressive and all, but I can't help wondering, how much does it cost?"

Immediately, the reporter asked the one question that everyone wanted to find out. The crowd of bystanders might know nothing about mechs, but the people sitting closer to the front knew much more about mechs. What Ves had introduced so far about the Crystal Lord was overwhelmingly positive and definitely outperformed the mainstream rifleman mech models that dominated the market.

"The Crystal Lord is a premium mech design positioned at the upper end of the local market. The base price for the limited-quantity gold label prestige models is 90 million credits."

That caused pretty much everyone to gasp.

"I can buy two good-quality rifleman mechs with that much money!"

"Forget about those overpriced mainstream junk, I'd rather buy four or five budget models instead!"

Ves continued on as if he didn't hear the outrage. "The silver label Crystal Lords will soon be made available for 75 million credits, whereas the bronze label Crystal Lords will be sold for 65 million credits."

The fact that even the cheapest version came at a more expensive price than the Blackbeak caused everyone to become perplexed. Certainly, the mech was powerful, but did Ves have to be so greedy?

If not for the nine mechs standing in a row behind him, the crowd would have been more vocal in their outrage.

"Absurd! This toy is too expensive! I'm out of here!"

"I don't know. It's expensive and all, but we can afford to buy one. It's a pretty good mech if you only want quality."

Another reporter put forth a question. "Mr. Larkinson, your Crystal Lord looks very impressive. What we want to know is did you design this mech by yourself?"

"I worked on this design from the beginning of the design process. Only at the very end did I consult an anonymous mech designer. That entity who shall remain nameless generously tweaked my design and optimized it further."

"So it's not your own work!"

"I have meticulously logged the design process to the MTA to back my words. Much of the Crystal Lord's DNA is still my own work. The anonymous contributor only smoothed out some inefficiencies."

Some people looked skeptical, while others showed a more understanding expression. Those familiar with his history automatically assumed that Master Olson had lent a hand.

Most people didn't care. They only wanted to see or get a hold of a good mech. The fact that Ves accepted help only added to the soundness of the Crystal Lord design.

"The quality of the Crystal Lord is acknowledged by the MTA as well. Those who wish to acquire an open licensing contract of the Crystal Lord design will have to pay an upfront sum of 5 billion credits."

As soon as he revealed the figure, the crowd turned numb yet again. Five billion credits was an extremely impressive number for an Apprentice Mech Designer. Most designs only held a value of 500 million to 2 billion credits.

The skeptics grew less skeptical as they quietly referenced their comms. The moment Ves mentioned the figure, he knew that some of the attendees wanted to confirm his words. Therefore, he arranged for the secrecy around his design to be dropped at that moment.

Everyone could browse the MTA's public database and call up the entry for the CL-A-01. Ves hadn't lied. The info page prominently displayed the license valuation at 5 billion bright credits.

"A design worth 5 billion credits! That's unreal!"

"Who validated this gimmicky design? The MTA should investigate whether the people who tested this mech have slept on the job. There's no way it's worth 5 billion credits!"

"Maybe this mech has something going for it. I don't know, but the MTA has never been wrong."

The credibility of the MTA formed a powerful cushion which stopped the skeptics from spreading any falsehoods. Ves had tactfully left the MTA's valuation at the end of this product reveal because he needed to counterbalance the negative sentiment that emerged when he detailed the sticker prices of his mechs.

Right now, the 5 billion license valuation overshadowed the earlier event entirely. Every mech insider spoke with glowing words as they discussed the awesome sum among themselves. In this light, charging well over 60 million credits for a single Crystal Lord didn't sound so crazy anymore.

Chapter 412 Heckler

Ves managed to raise the expectations of his potential customers. This was good for him, but not so good for others. This would be the perfect time for someone to spoil the party.

"I have a question!" A thirty-something year old woman with curling blond hair and a stylish beret stood up and asked.

The way she spoke with force and gravitas somehow pulled everyone's attention to her. Ves instantly recognized the training put the manner she modulated her voice. She meticulously trained to achieve this effect.

"Go ahead." Ves replied simply, trying to appear as unruffled as possible even as he recognized he faced a tough customer.

"I do not doubt the craftsmanship of these admittedly impressive copies, but they are from your top-of-the-line label, are they not? How many of them will be made available, and what are the differences between these mechs and your readily available offerings?"

Ves may have been able to dazzle most customers, but the woman spotted the loopholes in his presentation. Against this line of questioning, he had no choice but to tell the truth.

"The Living Mech Corporation's gold label mechs all come with a guarantee that they have been handcrafted by myself. Therefore, they are only available in limited quantities. Of the nine mechs you see before you, five is made available for auction while the other four is reserved for internal use. For the time being, the LMC will not be releasing any gold label mechs, for obvious reasons."

The mech insiders nodded in understanding. Many mech designers already disappeared from Bentheim, making it a much less livelier place. Once the Mech Corps called up the second wave of mech designers, the only ones who remained would be the elderly and the special cases.

With regards to the limited quantity of gold label Crystal Lords, the news benefited the collectors the most. The rarer the model, the more valuable their

investment, though they also had to be prepared to bid high in order to get their hands on a copy.

"There are differences between the three labels." Ves continued. "The gold label version is the most complex design in this product line and features the largest chest crystal that has received special treatment that makes it more effective. The silver label Crystal Lords that my company produced in-house is nearly identical to the gold label version, but incorporates very small amounts of simplification in its construction and will also host a smaller chest crystal, but will similarly benefit from special treatment."

"What's the performance difference?!"

"Both the silver and bronze label chest crystals are unable to hold as much energy, so they will reach their saturation at roughly half the amount. Their output will be similarly affected by the same proportion."

This put a slight damper on everyone's enthusiasm. A single beam with twice the power of a laser cannon was very impressive because it outputted a very high amount of thermal energy at once. This helped a lot in terms of penetrating heavily-armored opponents.

With a half-strength beam, this effect would be much less pronounced. Unless the mech pilot possessed supreme control, it would be impossible for two half-powered laser beams to hit the same spot on a moving target. The damage would certainly be spread out over a wider surface area.

Therefore, even if they outputted the same amount of energy, the effective damage differed remarkably. On the battlefield, these differences could become a matter of life and death.

"What's the use of this gimmick then?"

"Do not forget that it offers a remarkable amount of defense against directed energy weapons. The beams unleashed by the bronze and silver label Crystal

Lords are still extremely powerful and can deliver a sucker punch to any opponent regardless of the expenditure of their laser rifles."

Ves thought about this problem and before and delivered a prepared response without any hiccups. Since most of the Crystal Lords made available consisted of lesser quality mechs, it was important for the LMC to highlight the usefulness of the smaller crystals.

In any case, Ves mainly spoke to the mech insiders in the crowd. As long as he won them over, he achieved his goal.

Sadly, the woman wasn't done. "Do you have a physical copy here so we can compare their differences?"

"We do not have one on hand, but we can provide something even better."
Ves replied and snapped his fingers.

A large amount of carrying bots emerged from a back entrance. They all carried high-quality portable simulator pods supplied by Marcella's brokerage. The bots brought over a hundred of these pods at a time.

"Any potentate here is free to try out the virtual copies of each version of the Crystal Lord for fifteen minutes at a time! You may opt to test out the mech in a number of prepared scenarios, from empty sandboxes to complex battlefield environments."

A substantial portion of the crowd lit up at the appearance of the simulator pods. Though they only worked for potentates, a significant part of the crowd actually consisted of active duty or retired mech pilots.

"Is there any multiplayer available, or will the simulations serve us with AI-controlled bots?" The woman asked.

This was important, because the LMC meticulously placed the setpieces in the simulations to bring out the Crystal Lord's potential. Allowing the

attendees to bring the Crystal Lord design in an online competitive environment might lead to awkward situations where the design failed to demonstrate any value.

As a design that thrived in longer engagements, the Crystal Lord did not favor the high-intensity combat inherent in mech duels.

"From tomorrow onwards, the LMC will release all three labels of the Crystal Lord onto Iron Spirit and other virtual games. Those present here will be allowed to experience our new products in a variety of situations."

Ves admittedly dodged the issue, but did it in the best way possible. People would still be able to test out the Crystal Lord in more dynamic combat situations, they just needed to wait another day.

In fact, Gavin proposed to delay the release of the virtual mechs by a single day for several reasons. First, it stopped the naysayers from pointing out that the LMC lacked confidence in their own designs. If the female heckler continued to ask, Ves could easily put out an excuse that they delayed the release due to technical or legal reasons.

Secondly, a delay of a single day might not sound like a big deal, but it would be way too late for the reporters who raced to publish their pieces on the press conference by the end of the day.

The news portals all prided themselves on delivering up-to-date news. It made no sense for them to wait another day just to test out the Crystal Lord a little more. After all, Ves already brought out a sufficient number of readily available simulator pods. Who cared if he manipulated the the scenarios?

The reporters that attended the press conference came here to cover a product reveal. Reviewing the mechs could be done by specialists at a later date.

The woman very obviously looked unresigned. Ves made ample preparations this time. The previous instance where Ves allowed himself to get caught up in the moment when Michael Dumont challenged him to a design duel wouldn't happen again.

Ves couldn't read any hesitation in her eyes, but he figured that she might be adjusting her plans right now.

"Fair enough." She said. "Yet you still have all of these working, physical copies on display. Why not showcase their capabilities in a live duel?"

That caused the crowd to swing back in her favor. Her argument sounded very compelling. No matter the benefits of experiencing a simulation, they all lacked the raw, visceral impact of real mechs fighting against each other in front of their eyes.

"The Crystal Lord is not a duelling mech. Its a high-mobility premium rifleman mech that maintains its strength for hours at a time whereas many other mechs might reach their limits at that time. Unless we reserve the largest arena on Bentheim and let the duel format stretch for hours, you won't be able to appreciate the Crystal Lord's true value."

A lot of people looked disappointed. Suitable or not, everyone loved to watch a mech duel. They found it rather disappointing that Ves did not plan on showcasing the power of his mech in any duel.

His answer also precluded any challenges. Cowardly as he might seem, Ves left little means in which others could challenge him to a design duel.

Ves figured that the woman who asked the questions might be a mech designer. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to hone in on the holes in his presentation. He smirked minutely at her, as if he was confident he could defeat all of her tricks.

Right now, the only thing that could lead to a lot of trouble is if someone insisted on a duel. In fact, it looked like the woman still possessed a means to pressure Ves.

"I have a friend who is a mech designer. He happens to have designed a similar mech in terms of performance. Why not accept a challenge from my friend?"

"Hahaha!" Ves laughed. "Does his mech sell for upwards of 90 million credits? Has he incorporated an energy-absorbing light crystal in its chest? Is his laser rifle as light as mine? I doubt it unless your friend is a Journeyman Mech Designer!"

Not a lot of mech models sold for 90 million credits in the first place in the Bright Republic. They mostly consisted of customized designs that incorporated a rudimentary level of resonance.

His retort left the woman with little openings to pursue her challenge. Whether her friend was at the same level as Ves or not, the chances of coming up with a mech that was similar to the Crystal Lord was minute.

Although the crowd would still enjoy a duel between mechs of different configurations, it didn't serve that much of a point in the context of a design duel.

An ordinary mech duel tested the skill of the mech pilots and the qualities of their machines. It was primarily a contest between the pilots. The designers played second fiddle in that regard.

A design duel on the other hand tested the skill of the mech designers in designing the best mechs possible. If the mechs shared little in common, then the influence of other factors such as the matchups between different types of mechs and the skill of the mech pilots became more relevant.

Such duels still went on, but the person being challenged would generally be regarded as a genius or a fool.

The woman appeared to open her mouth once again, but Ves forcefully forestalled her words by holding up his palm. "There are other guests who want to ask a question. Let them have their turn."

Raising his palm in this way was actually a signal for someone in the backstage to muffle the woman's words. As she attempted to utilize her compelling voice yet again, no sound escaped her throat. Hidden machines embedded into the convention hall dampened the sound of her voice just as they left her mouth, preventing anyone else from hearing her voice.

This was one of the benefits of renting an upscale convention hall. The cheaper ones lacked this convenient feature, forcing organizers to resort to more disruptive means if they wanted to silence a troublemaker.

Still, many mech insiders recognized what went on. His solution had been fairly discrete, but the smart ones in the crowd couldn't help but lower their impression of Ves and the LMC. As acidic as the woman might have been, she asked a lot of questions that they should have brought up in the first place.

Ves didn't care.

As Ves continued to answer questions from others, the earlier harsh questioning became less acute in everyone's minds. That was not to say that the reporters didn't challenge him on certain points, but they obviously didn't care whether the Crystal Lord succeeded in becoming a hit.

All they wanted was more material to add to their articles, and Ves largely obliged.

Chapter 413 Like A Drug

Once the first attendees exited from the simulator pods, they shared their remarkable experiences to the people waiting in line.

"Remarkable! It's so lifelike! This is the best mech I've ever piloted!"

"I can't believe how much at home I feel when I pilot the Crystal Lord! I tried all three versions and the gold label mech is by far the most sublime!"

"The cheaper bronze label model is no slouch either! Let me tell you, my mercenary corps already owns a silver label Blackbeak. Piloting a bronze label Crystal Lord is almost the exact same experience!"

Their subjective experiences and lack of technicalities that they could point out as issues led to a growth in positivity. Everyone focused on the good points of his design, and those who tried the models out in the simulations came away with strong desire to pilot the mech again.

"Fifteen minutes is too short! I can't wait until tomorrow to pilot this virtual mech again! I need the real deal!"

"When will the auction start? Let me get my hands on a copy as fast as possible!"

Ves deliberately arranged the simulator pods to be placed in the vicinity of the nine gold label Crystal Lords. He also allowed the guests to approach the mechs and touch their cool metallic surface. This way, the vast majority of the attendants became exposed to the mutually amplified auras radiated by the mechs.

It was difficult to describe their effects on the people who neared the mechs. Everyone gazed at the machines with reverence. Some even lowered their heads in respect. As they discussed the Crystal Lord design among themselves, their thoughts and words would unconsciously be colored by their altered moods.

Nobody showed any awareness of this effect. As far as Ves was concerned, he achieved the same effect as outright drugging them into liking the Crystal Lord design.

The thought of it caused him to smirk, and as he continued to make himself available for questioning, he radiated supreme confidence in his work.

Under the intangible but near-oppressive might of the Crystal Lords, no one dared to affront their dignity by mentioning any shortcomings. Most of the crowd subjected those that raised any critical points with dirty looks. Under this strong social pressure, troublemakers found little means to raise another ruckus.

Of course, Ves and the LMC did not leave everything over to fate. After answering another question, Ves briefly excused himself and walked to the side. Gavin greeted him with a nod as he kept his eyes on his data pad.

"How many troublemakers have been carted away by security?"

"Twenty-five and counting." Gavin answered. "Since they only tried to heckle you, Sanyal-Ablin isn't able to hold them back and question them. We haven't been able to trace whether they attempted to stir up trouble on behalf of others and who their employers might be."

"Don't count on finding that out even if we held them custody. These professional agitators are smarter than that." Ves grunted. "Still, Sanyal-Ablin is surprisingly effective in rolling them up before they could make a scene."

Gavin raised his head and grinned. "That's what you get when you hire the best. SASS has a lot of experience in crowd control. It makes sense when you consider how obsessive the Konsu Clan is about conformity. The AIs they employ are keeping a close watch on every attendants at once. The moment they attempt to raise their voice, the sound dampeners immediately silence their throats."

"Too bad they didn't caught that woman." Ves frowned. "Why hasn't security stepped in?"

"They couldn't silence her at the time because she took the place of an invited guest and sat close to the front. By standing up, she called out a lot of attention to herself while making any attempts at silencing her really obvious. Her voice also carried a strange property that inserted doubts in the AI."

That was something else he wanted to know about. "Who is she, anyway? How come she's in our guest list?"

"Her name is Mellie Neverland. She's actually a cousin of Andar Neverland. She's a mech designer as well, though she works at one of the larger mech manufacturers in Ansel. According to her record, she doesn't have a lot of designs under her belt. She only contributed a small part of a couple of larger collaborative projects."

He somewhat understood her background now. "She's a graduate of the Ansel University of Mech Design, isn't she?"

Gavin looked down at the data pad. "You're right!"

An outsider like Gavin might not be fully aware of the influence of the AUMD. Ves guessed that Mellie had been tasked by someone from the AUMD to drag down the perceived value of the Crystal Lord as much as possible.

"Could it be Mr. Neverland who is behind Mellie's attempt?" Gavin spoke out.

Ves shook his head. "It doesn't make any sense for him to do so. He's earned a sizable fortune with mass producing the bronze label Blackbeaks for the domestic market. Sure, his Elemental Mech Engineering isn't suited to produce the Crystal Lord, but that is no reason to risk his current licensing contract with us. The mastermind is likely someone else connected to the AUMD."

As for why someone from the AUMD wanted to spoil his party, Ves could think up a lot of reasons. It might be due to animosity against those who with foreign ties, or an attempt to diminish his value in front of the Mech Corps so that he wouldn't take away a plump assignments from their graduates.

"I don't get it, boss. Why does the AUMD feel the need to put you down?"

"They feel threatened by someone like me. I studied at Rittersberg, a place filled with spoiled brats descended from decadent billionaires and poisonous politicians. A small number of mech designers who graduated from my school act all high and mighty once they enter the industry. They compensate their lack of talent and ability by bullying everyone aside with their connections or their wealth."

"I thought the mech industry is an extremely competitive field." Gavin replied with puzzlement. "Shouldn't those rich kids make fools of themselves once they publish a couple of designs?"

"Ordinarily, their lack of talent is exposed in very short order. You're right in that the market won't be fooled by a bad design. However, those with means have other tricks available to them. The easiest way is to hire or coerce a more capable mech designer into designing mechs in their stead."

"I see." Gavin nodded. "So these good-for-nothings stay in business far longer than they ought to. Still, isn't it easy to expose them in that case?"

"Hahaha." Ves laughed in a low tone. "Who would dare go against their influence by challenging their competence? Anyone who sticks out their head won't gain a lot of rewards, but instead piss off a powerful influence."

"Still, you don't seem like one of those spoiled brats you're talking about. Unlike them, you've demonstrated your actual skill several times in public."

"That's even worse. Since the graduates of the AUMD can't take out their frustration on those spoiled brats, they train their firepower on schmucks like

me. Even though I enjoy some backing as well, they can't help me out in this area."

"Why not? You're a Larkinson and an apprentice of a Master Mech Designer. That should scare loads of people off."

"Those influences can deter a casual bystander, but they don't look so scary to those in the know. We Larkinsons are fairly famous in the mech pilot circles, but we don't have any influence in the industry other than myself. As for my Master, she's many light-years away from the Bright Republic. I'm just a nominal disciple, so how much does she really care about me?"

The few times she met her, Ves in fact felt as if Master Olson genuinely cared about him, if only a little bit. Perhaps she might have ulterior motives and perhaps she saw a use for him in the future, but Ves never got the impression that she regarded him as dirt.

Still, as busy as she was, Ves never fooled himself into thinking that he registered high in her list of priorities. A Master Mech Designer wielded enough influence to affect the entire Friday Coalition. She probably spent most of her time on developing her own enterprises.

"Besides catching people who wanted to make a fuss, Sanyal-Ablin also caught a couple of armed people outside the steps." Gavin spoke in a serious tone.

"How many?"

"Only three, but all of them had been kitted out with stealth gear. Regular security companies would have been fooled by these measures."

"These guys aren't much of a threat even if they managed to sneak inside." Ves waved away the threat. "Whoever sent them is too small-time for us to track them down. Tell Sanyal-Ablin to deliver them to the local authorities and let them handle the thugs as they see fit."

The high-class convention hall hid an abundance of defenses. Before anyone could pull out a gun and shoot into the crowd, a large number of solid plates would emerge from the ground to block his line of fire.

Anyone with a bit of know-how should know about this and more. That a bunch of stealthed assassins or saboteurs attempted to cause a major incident anyway showed their lack of importance.

"Have any more people entered the hall since the end of my presentation?"

"A fair amount of people are constantly coming through. In fact, it's starting to become a problem. Too many people are entering, and not enough are going out! By now, Sanyal-Ablin is forcing the people outside to queue up and wait their turn."

"This is a good sign." Ves smiled. "The men and women clamoring to come inside must have heard about the event from a broadcast or through word of mouth. What they heard about the Crystal Lord must have been extremely positive as well. Otherwise, they won't be coming in such great numbers."

"A lot of mech designers are attempting to enter as well. Per your orders, the guards refused them entry."

"Good." Ves nodded.

Mellie Neverland and a handful of other mech designers only got to attend this product reveal because of their relations to him or the LMC.

Ves did not look forward to getting challenged to a design duel, so he straightforwardly forbid entry to other mech designers. Perhaps he might be pissing off a lot of fellow colleagues, but he wouldn't be the first mech designer to do so.

He found it more important to retain complete control than to please potential troublemakers.

Once he took a look at the contents of the data pad, Ves nodded to Gavin and patted his shoulder. "Keep up the good work. Try and find a way to get people to leave. I want as many people to witness my mechs as possible today."

"That's going to be really hard. Look at their faces. Do any of the attendees look like they want to go?!"

"Figure something out with Sanyal-Ablin. They should be good in this as well."

Around ten minutes later, Ves saw a result. He didn't know how, but Sanyal-Ablin managed to set up a rotation. Aside from the invited guests, everyone else could only linger in the hall for a limited amount of time.

Time went by and Bentheim's sun fell over the horizon. By the end of the local day, tens of thousands of citizens and tourists visited the hall and got a close glimpse of the nine impressive mechs.

The auction held at the evening went great as well. The collectors and representatives all stewed underneath the combined auras for hours at a time.

Such a strong and pervasive exposure to the effects from the X-Factor of the mechs inured them to its influence. However, even if they got used to the charm of the mechs, they still couldn't think about parting from their presence.

The representatives of different collectors who hadn't decided to attend all did their best in convincing their bosses to bid on the gold label mechs. Some even managed to pull their collectors from whatever they were doing in order to attend the auction in person.

This led to a raft of eye-watering bidding. The most expensive mech auctioned for 134 million credits while the cheapest one went for a respectable 122 million credits.

While the winning bids hadn't reached the level he had hoped, Ves could still call this day a success.

"Still, even if I managed to woo the crowd, I don't know if the rest the market will be so easily convinced."

Without seeing the mechs in person, others wouldn't be drugged by their auras. Will the Crystal Lord models still appeal to them? Ves could only wait until tomorrow to find out.

Chapter 414 Skepticism

After a successful day of presenting the Crystal Lord, Ves patiently slept and waited until the next day to find out the public's response.

As he ate breakfast in his hotel room, Gavin came up to him and provided him with a brief report.

"Almost every publication who attended the press conference wrote glowing praise about the Crystal Lord! We succeeded in wowing them and transfer their enthusiasm in their reporting!"

Ves accepted the data pad and skimmed through the articles they published in the morning. Some delivered unfiltered words of admiration, while others looked more restrained, as if the editors of the publications forcefully leashed their over-enthusiastic reporters.

Nonetheless, getting that much was more than sufficient for the LMC. Interest in the Crystal Lord obviously spiked upwards and millions of people started looking up the mech on the galactic net after just a few hours of exposure.

"What about the negative articles?"

"There are a lot of other publications who are trying to throw shade on the Crystal Lord. Some of them are excessively negative while others express some doubts at its value proposition. I don't believe that all of these news portals are following someone's orders. They just don't buy into the hype."

"Hm, that's to be expected." Ves nodded gravely as he sipped a cup of coffee.

"Even though the Crystal Lord looks impressive when you see it in person, it's

hard to convey its value onto a spec sheet. It's unusual for an Apprentice Mech Designer like me to publish such an expensive design."

"The main point the skeptics are raising is if it is a product looking for a market. Most rifleman mech models in this price range are designed by Journeyman, and all of their products are a notch above your own in terms of value for money. The only wildcard is the amount of value your gimmick can bring to the table."

Ves smirked. "That's exactly why I kept working on this feature that all of you thought was a big waste of time. I never intended it to be a game-changer in a battle. As long as people think it's useful enough to justify its price, it's accomplishing its mission."

The virtual models of the design appeared onto the different simulation games as well, allowing the public to explore their strengths at their own pace. The first reviews already reached glowing levels as many of them became affected the X-Factor of the virtual mechs they piloted.

As Ves read through the reports, he got a sense that this effect became a lot stronger than compared with the Blackbeak. Anyone who piloted the virtual version of the offensive knight design came away with much less enthusiasm.

Perhaps that was one of the main differences between B and C-grade X-Factors. The responses of the early adopters sounded no different than those who piloted any of his mechs in person.

This happened to have formed a powerful boost for the newly published Crystal Lord. The overwhelmingly positive feedback elevated the virtual models to a whole new level. As they gained in popularity, they also became more prominent in the virtual marketplace, leading to more curious players trying them out.

"It's too bad that it's a fairly demanding mech to pilot." Gavin noted sullenly. "It's classified as a 5-star virtual mech in Iron Spirit, so not a lot of people are qualified to purchase and pilot it in the first place."

Right now, the higher-leagued player base of online games like Iron Spirit had plummeted due to the war. These working men and women needed to focus their full attention on surviving the war. They had no time to waste on games in simulations that didn't cut it as a professional training tool.

Ves still smiled. "The more exposure, the better. Great things start from small steps. Building up some grassroots popularity for our new design is never a bad thing. The more the laymen talk about it, the more the professionals take note. Word will spread, and eventually interest will blow over to the people in charge of procuring mechs."

"Actual sales are still very modest. We may have received a lot of orders for the silver label Crystal Lord, but we aren't getting any further orders except from those who attended the conference."

They both knew that the Crystal Lord might be off to a rough start. Ves already thought about it extensively and believed that the situation might change once people start to convey their experiences with piloting the mechs in circulation. "These things take time. It's normal for potential buyers to hold back on purchasing an expensive mech. They want to avoid being scammed, so they'll only start to move once we receive some positive feedback from the first wave of customers."

"Yeah, about that, we're kind of in a tight spot with regards to production. I don't need to tell you this, but the Mech Nursery is bottlenecked by the fact that it only runs three production lines. That was already insufficient with the silver label Blackbeak and now with the silver label Crystal Lord on top, their waiting lists have reached an insane proportion."

This was one problem that the LMC couldn't easily solve. "We already went into debt in order to finance the acquisition of two additional Benson production lines. Do we have to dig a deeper hole?"

"You can always have the company issue more stock. The LMC is obviously on the rise, so its stock is really hot right now."

"No. Absolutely not." Ves quickly shook his head. "I haven't changed my mind on this stance. The other shareholders don't want to dilute their ownership. Personally, I don't feel desperate enough to sell my own shares either."

The LMC currently faced a paper loss resulting from missed opportunities. That was an entirely different to sustaining real losses by spending much more money than they earned from their revenue streams.

Basically, the company was already in a pretty good spot, but everyone wanted to move over to a better position. They just had to pay a price in order to do so.

Ves already relayed his opinion on the matter to Calsie, and tasked her to coordinate with the board and the Finance Department to find out a solution that made everyone happy. With the LMC's financial growth prospects, taking out another loan shouldn't be difficult, but the sticking point was the amount of investment they wanted to make.

A conservative expansion entailed acquiring two second-hand production lines on the cheap, while more ambitious plans called for diving deep into debt in order to finance a whopping amount of six new production lines.

Though Ves did not look forward to saddling the LMC with debt, in the long run it paid off. The only worry was that something drastic happened in the meantime that might disrupt the company's future profit streams.

In these uncertain times, it became increasingly harder for mech manufacturers to obtain loans at favorable rates. One of the most awful

consequences of the earlier mass raids by the Vesians was that banks suddenly hiked all of their interest rates overnight. It was a lot more expensive to owe money to them after that point.

This was why the question of financing a further expansion required a lot of consideration. Even after they made a decision, they might spend a month or two on negotiating the best possible terms with the banks they wanted to go in bed with. Once they finally managed to acquire the production lines and get them up and running with an expanded crew of mech technicians, at least half a year might have gone by.

All the while, demand for the Crystal Lord piled up.

To placate the urgent demand, the LMC pretty much had to resort to relying on third-party manufacturers yet again. This was something else that Ves had delegated to Calsie and the rest.

"What kind of third-party manufacturers are expressing interest in producing the bronze label Crystal Lords?"

"Well, first off, you've got Vaun Industrial." Gavin began. "They are remarkably open in their intentions, despite not earning as much from their Blackbeaks as they hoped. Bronze label Blackbeaks only make up a tiny portion of their total earnings, so it's rather unusual for them to be so forward about licensing the Crystal Lord. I get the idea that if not for the steep 5 billion credit price tag for the standard contract, they might have already signed it instead of coming up to us."

Ves nodded. "Vaun Industrial is a big player, and they excel in volume and precision. I don't really like to go into business with them though, but it's hard to refuse a partner once they have a foot in the door."

Unspoken was the fact that despite the lack of passion in their production methods, they did a really good job in fabricating his mechs. They matched

the design schematics to an almost obsessive level of precision, and no one ever reported any major defects from the mechs that rolled off their sophisticated production lines.

"I don't know why you're so hung up about Vaun. They're our best partner by far with regards to the Blackbeaks. They're a lot better than Neverland's EME, which still needs constant monitoring from us in order to avoid any slip-ups."

"It's difficult to explain. It's enough for you to know that I would rather work with companies like EME with all of its troubles than Vaun. The latter see mechs as commodities while the former knows there is more to quality than mechanical perfection."

Someone like Gavin wouldn't understand, so they quickly moved on from this point. They discussed some other matters, such as the company's liquidity and how much they needed to spend on promoting their new design.

"We should keep the hype alive by running occasional ads." Gavin suggested.

"Once the hype dies down completely, it's hard to bring it back to life. We should spend at least 100 million credits a month on this, and that's the bare minimum. Once Vaun Industrial and other partners crank up their production lines and produce the Crystal Lord by the hundreds, we can really ramp up our promotion by then."

"Even if we're in the process of acquiring more debt, don't skimp on the promotion. The first month after publishing a new design is the most crucial period of all. We can't afford to neglect the importance of shaping everyone's first impressions of our new mech.

Gavin dutifully noted all of his words and would send them off to Calsie later. In the meantime, Ves finished his breakfast and allowed some attendants to brush up his clothes and appearance. He adopted a couple of smiles until he settled on one that seemed modestly polite.

"How do I look?" Ves asked.

"Confident, but not arrogant. It's the right look for a mech designer who's talented and is aware of it. You don't want to widen that smile, or else you might come across as unhinged."

The reason why they went through the trouble of brushing up his appearance was because they scheduled a whole host of interviews for today. While they hadn't gotten any major publications to come and talk to Ves, they did garner the interest of many smaller local news portals.

Though they didn't reach a very wide audience, they formed an influential voice in certain communities. A mosquito's leg still contained meat, so Ves filled up his plate with as much of them as possible in order to substitute for a single chicken drum.

It was grueling work, though. Ves needed to maintain a constant veneer of poise in front of the recorders.

"Boss, don't think about how much the interviews will tire you out. Instead, think about what you get out of this. You only have to endure a single day of suffering."

"I don't know. I feel kind of desperate accepting all of these interviews from hack publications. For example, I don't even know why you invited The Mech Conspiracy. They're a bunch of crazies!"

Gavin laughed. "Crazy as they are, they are actually some of the most loyal customers you can have as long as you make them like you. Just study their latest conspiracy theories and find a way to portray the LMC in a good light."

"That's impossible. These people believe that half of the MTA has been taken over by bots, and that every mech is secretly brainwashing their mech pilots into worshipping some unknown lizard-like race."

"It's a good thing you don't look like a lizard."

"Haha."

Chapter 415 Public Persona

Despite all of the work that Ves put into promotion his new design, the effect was hardly noticeable, but every little bit helped. He had no doubt that once they finished setting things up with the third-party manufacturers, people would have much more to talk about as more of them got exposed to his mechs.

Throughout the next week, Ves participated in several promotional events in a row. The reason why he filled up his schedule with these activities was because this might be his last opportunity to put in a good word on his newly released design.

After returning back to his hotel room, he felt tired to the bone. Even though his mind and body reached a transhuman state, the amount of activities he took part in almost crushed him into a worm. His spiritual exhaustion had reached a peak.

"I can't do this any longer. I'm not cut out for this line of work."

As the lead designer of the LMC, it was extremely important for Ves to get his face out and shape his audience's impressions of his new mech. Still, the company relied too much on him to do everything. While he worked to shift some responsibility to others so that it wouldn't collapse in his absence, Ves realized he overlooked one key player.

The LMC needed a spokesperson.

"Gavin?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Who will take over as the face of the company when I'm gone?"

Unlike Ves who did all the work, Gavin only stayed on the sidelines and arranged his schedule. He still looked relatively fresh and look eager to freshen up his boss so that he could drag them to another promotional event.

The moment Ves asked the question, his assistant looked pained. "Calsie isn't suitable for this role, and neither am I. We're too young and we don't understand mechs the way you do. The best we can put forth is Jake Altern."

Jake was an old man and single-handedly expanded the LMC from a small-scale mech workshop into a proper medium mech manufacturer. The COO knew more about the business side of the company than anyone else, including Ves.

Still, did the LMC benefit from putting forth an old geezer who couldn't get into the nitty gritty details when it came to discussing the intricacies of mechs?

"Jake is too old and doesn't have the expertise to answer industry-specific questions." Ves concluded.

"True. A young company such as ours needs to present a dynamic image. Most of our customers are mech pilots or mech commanders who looking for alternatives to the most conventional options on the market. Presenting a stiff and old-fashioned image goes against our positioning."

"Well said, Gavin."

The only problem was that this left no one qualified to represent the LMC in public.

"Boss. If we can't use an insider, why not adopt an outsider?"

"Hm. I was thinking about that as well."

Not all mech designers wanted to show up in front of a recorder and have his face projected throughout the entire state. They put up different kinds of as

their surrogates, and over time this experimentation have led to a number of best practices.

The most popular solution was to put forth a mech pilot as their public voice.

Though not too well-versed in the technical design and construction of a mech, they knew all about the stuff that customers really wanted to know. Mech pilots understood other mech pilots the most. This common level of understanding helped a lot in roping people into becoming their customers.

The only problem was picking the right person. Ves did not want to put up Melkor or anyone else from the Avatars of Myth. Being a spokesperson was a full-time job these days and mech pilots who chose to take on this role needed a lot of grooming to present a knowledgeable but authentic image in public.

"If you don't have any other suggestions, why not let the LMC sort this problem out on its own?"

Ves would have liked to select his own spokesperson, but he had a feeling he would be gone very soon. "Very well. Put it on their agenda and make sure they select someone by the end of this month. Once the bronze label Crystal Lords are beginning to appear on the market, we need to be more active in our promotion."

They didn't discuss anything else that evening. Ves was too tired and hit the sack soon after. The next day, a fateful message arrived at his comm.

It was the message that portended his next step in life, for good or ill.

"The Mech Corps is calling."

Ves briefly checked the galactic net and saw that a lot of other mech designers received the same message as well. The Mech Corps formally called up the second wave of mech designers to fight for their state.

Despite knowing that this day was long in coming, Ves still felt uneasy about it. He heard so many second-hand stories about mech designers in the Mech Corps that he didn't know if he should believe them all. He also didn't know if the Mech Corps valued him enough to assign him to a meaningful role.

"There's no use dragging this moment out."

Although the message granted its recipients a generous amount of time before they needed to report to the Mech Corps, Ves wanted to get in early. He learned that tip from a classmate in school.

"Arriving early demonstrates your dutifulness and shows you care."

The Mech Corps constantly kept watch over its mech designers. Those who showed signs of disgruntlement and dragged their feet in their work tended to be transferred away from a research base and be sent straight to the frontlines.

However, before he submitted himself to the Mech Corps, Ves planned to make one final visit. He raised his comm and called up Melinda.

"Hiya Vessie." Melinda greeted him, though not with a smile this time. "I heard about what just happened. You're joining the war, aren't you?"

"Yeah." Ves nodded. "Don't worry about me, I'm not going to be picking up a weapon anytime soon."

Melinda still looked worried. "You should still watch out for yourself. The Mech Corps looks strong on the outside, but it's made out of countless cliques that fight over every scrap of resources they can get. That's one of the reasons why I opted to join the Planetary Guard. It's much simpler here, since we're only responsible for defending a single planet."

The burden of defending more than a thousand star systems at once fell heavily onto the shoulders of the Mech Corps. It was a difficult job to juggle at

the best of times, but once you factoring in the limited amount of funds and resources it had at its disposal, then internal fights often broke out.

Mech pilots being what they were, it wasn't unheard of for hem to punch each other in their faces. Even upper echelon would sometimes be guilty of this, as they all used to be mech pilots themselves. They learned their entire life how to develop their aggression and channel it against their opponents.

Learning how to compromise came much later in their careers.

"Since I'm going to be cut off from everyone very soon, I'd like to pay a visit to you. Are you free for today?"

"Hm, it's all hands on deck at the Planetary Guard right now, but we recently stepped down from the highest state of readiness. As long as ask around for some favors, I can probably clear up a couple of hours in my schedule. Is that alright?"

"That sounds great!"

A couple of hours later, Ves arrived at a stately-looking condominium in the middle of Dorum. Melinda's current apartment was actually one of the rewards he dangled out for her in exchange for piloting the Blackbeak in the duel against Captain Vicar's Havalax.

As far as condominiums went, the place Melinda lived portrayed a lot of quiet elegance. It was probably a huge hit to women, but others might like it as well for all the peace and quiet it radiated. The inner spaces contained a lot of gardens and minimalistic artwork. Together, they provided residents with a rare moment of serenity in an otherwise busy planet.

Once he reached the top of the condo, Ves stepped inside the penthouse, which commanded a sweeping view over Dorum.

"Welcome to my place!" Melinda waved from a sofa.

"Looks like you are doing well for yourself."

"Heh, ever since the duel, I can't even show my face in public anymore. Even though a lot of time has passed, hardly anyone forgot about that fight. I beat down a captain of the Mech Corps! Hardly anyone else can claim they can do the same!"

As Ves took a seat on the opposite sofa, Melinda blabbered on about how everyone treated her with more importance. The Planetary Guard started grooming her into an officer while her fellow mech pilots constantly slapped her back for showing that they could measure up against their military counterparts.

Ves smiled at her stories. If not for her current career, she would have made a perfect spokesperson for the LMC.

"What do you think about my new design?"

"I followed your press thingie while I was out on patrol. Don't tell my captain I did so." She winked at him. "All in all, if you weren't my cousin, I would have smacked your mouth. Really now, do you really have to charge so much for a rifleman mech? It's insane!"

"It's not meant to be a mass-production model. The Crystal Lord offers several enhancements over the mainstream models."

"Hah! Sure, but who would want to buy a single overengineered mech when they can get two normal ones instead?"

"My product doesn't cater to the average consumer."

"I'm telling you, each time I see you, your mouth is getting bigger and bigger. You're greedy, Ves. It's gotten to the point where it's blowing over to the rest of the Larkinson Family. Last time I visited Rittersberg, all they talk about is

stocks and dividends and how much money you're going to shovel in their pig-like throats."

Ves laughed awkwardly at that accusation. "Everything's easier with money. Do you think a fancy place like this can be bought for a couple of credits?"

"That's not the point I'm trying to make. You used to be small and cute, you know? Just like any other munchkin at the Larkinson Estate."

"I'm a grown person now. My innocence is long gone."

"I get the feeling you lost a lot of other things as well along the way." Melinda spoke with a low voice. "Meeting you again has made me realize you're turning into something else. The Ves I used to know is slowly making way for a different kind of person."

"What kind of person are you talking about?"

"You're turning into one of those stereotypical mech designers you see in the dramas. Not the losers who are barely keeping their workshops afloat, but those successful ones who let their achievements grow their egos blow through the roof."

Ves knew what she was referring to. The mech designers portrayed in those stories tended to be the ruthless sort who fought and cheated their way to success. They didn't hesitate to order a hit on their competitors if they could get away with it. They treated their own subordinates like furniture and their customers like sheep.

In the dramas, mech designers like that often showed up as conceited villains who thought they could get anything they wanted as long as they threw enough money at it. They treated their existence as if they had been descended from gods, and they openly behaved as if the galaxy revolved around their whims.

As Ves momentarily reflected on himself, he had to admit he changed from two years ago. "Even if I'm a different person now, I hardly walk and talk like one of those stupid caricature. I only changed because this is the way that business is done. The true mech industry is hardly cutthroat to the extent where I dress up in stealth clothing and sneak into the bedroom of my rivals to assassinate them in person."

The convoluted stories the entertainment industry came up with regards to mech designers boggled the mind. Though they also broadcasted other stories where mech designers played the hero, it was far too common to see them in the role of ruthless mech magnate.

Melinda didn't appear to be convinced. She stared hard at Ves as she stood up and walked close to him. Once she reached his position, she extended her hands and grabbed his cheeks, only to pull them apart.

"I know the old Ves is still there! Come on out!"

Chapter 416 Sign Here

Ves spent a couple of hours at Melinda's place. They reminisced about the past and exchanged their thoughts about the war.

Unlike most Larkinsons, Melinda didn't seem so eager to distinguish herself in the great conflict. "I'm not so hungry to earn acknowledgement from our uncles and aunts. What's the use of making a name for yourself when you end up in an early grave?"

"You should be careful with such talk. Others might think you're a coward."

"So what if they did? I'm my own person. I don't need anyone's acknowledgement. Besides, I've more than earned my chops in the Planetary Guard and that stupid duel."

"What will you do if the war reaches the surface of Bentheim? It could always happen."

"Pah." Melinda dismissively waved her hand. "The Vesians never managed to set foot on Bentheim before and they won't do so for the foreseeable future. They can't break the Republic all by themselves."

"It can always happen. No one can be certain of how this war will progress."

"Even if the Vesians arrive at my doorstep, I'll continue to do my duty. There's no question about that." Melinda stated with conviction. "Just because I'm not eager to earn for glory doesn't mean I'll run away at the first sign of trouble. I merely don't buy in the glory that the other Larkinsons are talking about. I must be lacking those genes."

No one truly believed the Vesians could succeed in breaking through. They feared the possibility, but hundreds of years of unending failure inured everyone to the status quo.

Ves faintly found that attitude to be wrong. Maybe it was because he experienced these tumultuous times for himself, but his intuition told him that this time would be different. The problem was convincing others of the gravity of this current conflict.

"By the way, have you gotten in touch with Raella?"

Mentioning the current black sheep of the Larkinson Family sank Melinda's mood to the bottom of a pit.

"She isn't accepting my calls. From what I can gather, nobody else has managed to get in touch with her. She's completely involved in her own little world. From the intelligence that the Planetary Guard has gathered, she's become something of a champion pilot to the Blood Claws. They parade her out whenever they need to fight a mech duel."

"That sounds dangerous."

"I won't argue that. Raella's got as much balls as any Larkinson serving in the frontlines. Mech duels that take place in official arenas are already dangerous enough, but the underground arenas are ten times worse. It takes a real survivor to make it out alive from there."

Both of them looked a little worried, but Raella made her bed. If she thought she could handle it, then Ves couldn't do anything about her reckless choice.

"How influential are the Blood Claws? Are they a big deal?"

Melinda snorted. "Hah! Big deal? They're massive! They just hide it well. They control roughly a third of Bentheim's seedy underbelly. Nothing happens on their territory without them knowing about it. They're a violent bunch and the aftermath of their fights are always a hell to clean up. The only reason why they aren't mopped up is because we can never stamp them out and the cost would be too much for us to bear."

This was a familiar refrain that every authority figure repeated when someone asked why they hadn't mopped up the gangs.

"What are the Blood Claws good at?"

"Hm. They don't have any specialties as far as I know. They've dipped their fingers into gambling, extortion, stimulants, pirated mechs and more.

Whatever you can think of, they probably have someone doing it. That's what makes them so pervasive."

"They sound like swell guys."

"They used to be worse. They only cleaned up their act once they couldn't expand anymore."

He enjoyed his time at Melinda's, even if he couldn't stay for long. It was inconvenient for him to travel to Rittersberg, so talking with one more Larkinson besides Melkor reminded him he was a part of the Larkinsons as

well. Blood was thicker than water, and Ves had a feeling he needed to count on them sooner or later.

"This might be the last time I see you for several years." Ves said as he stood at her doorstep. "I hope you take care of yourself, and keep an eye on my company as well."

She shrugged. "Will do, though it doesn't look like your company needs it. Your new mech is catching a lot of attention."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Ves checked the updated status report on the exposure of the Crystal Lord. Interest in the mech grew significantly, mostly because several pilots tried them out in simulators. Their good impressions translated into glowing praise, which attracted their friends to try a hand at piloting the mech as well.

Even with the positive word-of-mouth, the amount of orders hadn't grown by much. Buyers still wanted to hear more experiences from those who owned and piloted the physical copies of the mech.

"They'll have to wait for a long time, since as far as I know, every bidder who won a mech at the auctions are pure collectors."

These types of people cared a lot about the condition of their mechs. The newer, the better. It would be best if the mechs hadn't been piloted at all since they passed their testing phases.

It would be impossible for them to show off their new purchases by sticking a pilot into their cockpits and increase the wear and tear of the mech by skipping around.

In any case, Ves wouldn't have to deal with this issues very soon. Instead, he needed to report for duty.

He entered an armored shuttle and directed it to bring him towards a processing center of the Mech Corps in the outskirts of Dorum. After a short amount of time, the shuttle and its escorts settled down onto a massive parking space that hosted hundreds of shuttle.

As Ves exited the vehicle, he took in the din of conversation and realized that he hadn't arrived as early as he thought. Many other mech designers had already packed their bags and waited for the moment the Mech Corps called up the second wave.

His comm beeped as it received an automated message from the processing center. They sent him a map of the processing center and his schedule for the next couple of days.

"Looks like I've got a lot of inspections to go through."

Ves sounded a little worried because his body and mind was nothing like a baseline human. Even though the Bright Republic must have noted down his abnormalities, it would still raise some eyebrows with the Mech Corps he thought.

At this stage, a lot of mech designers already arrived. Ves took a casual glance of the people disembarking from their shuttles and aircars and guessed that most of them consisted of Apprentices and Journeymen.

Ves easily distinguished the latter from their attitude, body language and privileges. They treated obvious Apprentices like air and only held an equal conversation with other Journeymen.

To be sure, Journeyman Mech Designers enjoyed a lot more prestige because it was at this point that the mech industry regarded them as fully competent mech designers. Before advancing to this rank, mech designers still possessed a lot of holes in their knowledge base and couldn't fully guarantee the soundness of their designs.

In contrast, regardless of the person involved, any Journeyman Mech Designer who received formal recognition from the MTA could be counted on to deliver battleworthy mechs. Their designs covered every base, and often carried something extra in order to distinguish their products from others.

This was why even if the LMC reached the point of selling thousands of mechs, the industry still regarded it as a small-time player. His low rank hobbled the reputation of his designs. He could forget about conquering a significant share of the mech market as long as his status remained the same.

"I still have a lot of work ahead of myself in order to reach their heights."

Most Journeyman Mech Designers looked to be in their middle ages, though it was hard to guess due to the use of age-prolonging treatments. Many Journeymen enjoyed enough success to be able to afford the most preliminary suite of treatments that stretched out their aging process. They couldn't get back their youth, but the time of their natural deaths could still be extended by at least a century.

People who enjoyed age-prolonging treatments couldn't be distinguished from a baseline human unless they exhibited some characteristic traits. Most of the time, their behavior could be described as wearing a young skin, but acting like an old person.

Ves only rarely saw so many people who behaved in this manner before. Age-prolonging treatments was something that was out of the hands of the general public. Even the Larkinson Estate couldn't afford to provide any treatments to their most famous family members such as Grandpa Benjamin or Uncle Ark.

This was also one of the shortcomings of age-prolonging technology. Ves didn't understand the science behind it all, but it was generally known that it took a lot more effort to extend the lives of a potentate or mech pilot.

Their brains operated in a different manner from the brains of baseline humans. Theirs was much more active and in fact wore out a little faster. Age-prolonging treatments needed to be calibrated very specifically to accommodate the unique brains of every mech pilot.

The higher their rank, the bigger the challenge.

The Bright Republic at its current state simply couldn't afford to subsidize any age-prolonging treatments for their expert pilots. This actually led to a lot of them to pack up their bags and emigrate to the Friday Coalition or some other powerful state in a different star sector. The amount of expert pilots who stuck with the Bright Republic was very little.

Naturally, these expert pilots wouldn't necessarily have a good time in their new homes, and it wasn't as if the Mech Corps possessed no means of retaining some of them. Usually, they signed contracts with talented pilots that stated that if they happened to advance to expert pilot while in active duty, that they still needed to serve the end of their terms before they could go.

This illustrated the disparity in treatment between different ranks. Even if the Bright Republic didn't possess enough means to please all of their talents, they sure tried their best to accommodate them. Ves witnessed the differences first-hand.

Whereas Ves only received a message on his comm and a projected AI as his guide, junior officers personally received every incoming Journeyman. They would quickly be led to a smaller building off to the side that nonetheless looked more luxurious.

"Some day, I'll retreat the same kind of treatment." Ves shrugged and continued to follow the blinking projected ball that led him across the parking area and towards a large hangar-like structure.

Inside the cavernous walls, large amounts of mech designers lined up to report for duty and to go through their first inspections.

Despite the enormous lines, Ves moved forward rather quickly. The Mech Corps didn't choose to conduct their business inside this giant hangar for nothing. Once Ves arrived at the front, a bland-looking serviceman checked his identity and signed off on a whole stack of virtual documents.

"Sign here to acknowledge that you understand the rules and regulations of the Mech Corps, and that you cannot use ignorance of these regulations as an excuse."

"Sign here to confirm you agree with the secrecy clauses. The Mech Corps takes confidentiality and information security with the highest level of importance. Report immediately if you carry any electronic or biological implants, no matter how small or unrelated they might be to spying activities."

Ves dutifully noted some of the abnormalities in his body, most notably the Jutland organ. Even if the Mech Corps likely knew all of this before, he couldn't afford to slip up right at the start.

"Note down the possible conflicts of interest that might occur during your service time. Be as detailed as possible, and include both foreign and domestic influences."

"Sign here to consent to invasive health checks. The Mech Corps reserves the right to unilaterally operate and modify your body and its physiological functions without needing to adhere to any medical justifications."

"Sign here to state that during your service, you will put the interests of the Bright Republic over the interests of any other state or comparable entity. In case of a conflict of interests, you should immediately report it to your superiors."

Chapter 417 Theory

By the time Ves biometrically signed the twenty-odd documents, his fingers almost cramped up. Some organizations were content with scanning the DNA or the pupils of a person, but the Mech Corps adhered to a much more rigorous standard.

The sheer amount of actions Ves needed to do to sign each document was a struggle in itself. The Mech Corps was determined to prevent any mech designers from committing fraud or misrepresenting the truth.

Ves understood why, of course. Mech designers primarily designed mechs, but were capable engineers as well. They used to pull off all kinds of tricks, from hacking the devices that held the virtual documents and changing their clauses, to putting forth a remote-controlled android to serve in their stead.

The most extreme example actually consisted of a spoiled brat who ordered the kidnapping of another mech designer. Gruesome surgery turned the victim's body into a clone of the spoiled brat, while extremely brutal brainwashing slowly turned his personality into a passable imitation of the mastermind.

The entire scheme actually stood a good chance of working because the Mech Corps didn't perform invasive inspections back then. The doppelganger dutifully pretended to be someone else and while some may have held some suspicions, no one realized the truth.

The only reason why it fell through was because the spoiled brat showed himself in public when one of his parties went out of control. People quickly started to scratch their heads why this good-for-nothing mech designer could be in two places at once. Wasn't he working on debugging mechs in some isolated research base?

"Go on ahead and wait for inspection."

Ves moved on and followed the guide to a closed-off modular clinic. Throughout the rest of the day, he went through an extensive amount of tests. Due to his abnormal body, he enjoyed increased scrutiny and had to endure a lot more tests despite the existence of records that told the exact same story.

"We just want to be sure we got the right person." A doctor muttered when Ves asked why.

The Mech Corps wasn't interested in the potentially miraculous effects of his Jutland organ. Instead, they held a lot of concern about its unknown functioning and the intentions of its creator. Who knew what kind of biological programming it contained.

Ves came across the first obstacle then and there.

"You'll have to stay back, Mr. Larkinson." The doctor said as he furrowed at the inconclusive results in the reports. "We can let you go through the next steps of your initiation until we have received some assurances that you aren't carrying anything that might prove to be a detriment."

Ves expected that something like this might happen. "I can refer you to Master Olson's representative. He can vouch for me."

"That will help a lot!"

In cases like this where the Mech Corps lacked the means to resolve the issue, they would normally hold back the mech designer in question and dither on their assignments. Ves wanted to avoid such an awful fate, so he already prepared something beforehand.

He raised his comm and sent out the contact details for Horatio. "This is the contact for Master Olson's steward. He takes care of all her administrative issues and knows about my situation."

The doctor retreated and corresponded with Horatio. Ves couldn't eavesdrop on their conversation, but he had no doubt that the most contentious issues would be waved away.

After all, Ves was not the only mech designer here with connections to a foreign state. The Friday Coalition was a behemoth compared to the Republic, so the latter had no choice but to swallow every pill served in its mouth.

Some time later, the doctor returned and wordlessly nodded his head at Ves to move onwards.

"Thanks."

Although the experience was a little awkward, and the Mech Corps would never fully trust him, Ves knew that he had cleared the most essential hurdle.

He went through a final inspection where some bots stripped all of his clothes and belongings and issued him a bland, grey replacement outfit along with the most primitive comm he had ever seen.

"This thing doesn't even have a single app installed besides a clock."

After that, Ves reached a dormitory area where a handful of mech designers bunked inside small modular rooms erected for the purpose. He entered a room only to meet three unfamiliar faces.

"Look at what we have here! The latecomer has arrived!"

"Took you long enough!"

"You missed dinner, but we saved some for you."

Ves smiled and went inside and took a seat at the square table in the middle.

"Thank you, I'm starving."

Dinner in this case consisted of nothing more than a bland, stale nutrient pack along with lots of water to hydrate his stomach.

"Is this it?" Ves frowned. "It looks rather... bare."

Even prisoners got to enjoy reconstituted food that used nutrient packs as raw materials. Serving the dry bars of unidentifiable biological matter without any processing was jokingly considered as a borderline war crime. He introduced himself as Morgan Hollenfield.

One of the three mech designers sighed. He was a middle-aged man with dark brown hair and looked a lot older than the other two.

"The Mech Corps wants to show who's boss around here. We only get to enjoy the nutrient packs as breakfast, lunch and dinner until we go through what they call their lightest version of boot camp."

Everyone frowned at that. As a rule, mech designers were nerds and geeks. What did physical fitness have to do with how well they designed their mechs?

"It's another way to put us down!" A younger man burst out. "Those jumped-up mech pilots always think they are in charge, and want to drive in the point that we are their slaves!"

Morgan quickly pressed the young man's shoulder. "Calm down, Jim! The Mech Corps is always listening in! You can land yourself in a lot of trouble if you talk like that!"

"As if I care! I had a good career lined up and several designs in the works. I wasn't supposed to be called up!"

Morgan awkwardly laughed at Ves and the other mech designer. "Don't mind Jim too much. He's a scion of the Ronan Family."

That caused Ves to widen his eyes a bit. The Ronan Family owned a lot of asteroid mining operations. They weren't a big player in the resource market, but carved out a niche spot for themselves.

Jim probably enjoyed a lot of benefits if he was related to that Ronan Family. His company would be able to incur much less costs to produce a mech if it took advantage of raw materials being sold to it at cost price.

However, to Ves, Jim didn't look as if he enjoyed that much success. He looked a bit pathetic compared to the final mech designer.

The young man noticed the inquisitive stare and held out his hand to Ves. "Bartholomew Yi. Apprentice Mech Designer. Just call me Bart for short."

The man's appearance only showed a hint of asian characteristics, so that side of his bloodline must have thinned out a bit through the generations.

"Ves Larkinson, also an Apprentice Mech Designer."

All four were obviously Apprentices with their own pride and accomplishments, so nobody treat each other as anything but equals. Ves may have designed some great mechs and enjoyed the backing of an influential Master from the Coalition, but the others didn't lose out too much in their own careers.

As Ves gradually consumed the nutrient packs, he got to know his three new roommates.

"I've designed fifteen original designs in my career." Morgan proudly boasted. "Though they haven't won any awards, all of them turned out a handsome profit."

"What type of mechs did you design?" Ves asked as he tried to swallow another bite of dry nutrients.

"Oh, they run the gamut from light mechs to medium mechs, skirmishers to knights, landbound mechs to aerial mechs. The only kind of mechs I can't design are spaceborn, aquatic and heavy mechs."

"That's... a really wide range of mechs." Ves said, a little stunned.

It wasn't unheard of for mech designers to design a broad sweep of mech types. However, Ves always learned that mech designers needed to apply some focus, especially in the formative stages of Novice and Apprentice.

Scattering too much at such an early phase risked stalling a mech designer's development in developing his own style and design philosophy.

From the askance looks that Jim and Bart directed to Morgan, they must have thought the same.

"I know what you're thinking." Morgan replied, demonstrating his self-awareness. "Your reactions are just like everyone else who hears about my record, but hear me out. What if, I'm on the right track, and you guys are dead wrong?"

"That's impossible!" Jim erupted after smacking his palm against the tabletop. "Who's ever heard of an Apprentice advancing to Journeyman by designing every type of mech in the galaxy? Even if you have the lifespan to complete all of those designs, your focus is so diluted that there's hardly any style to speak of!"

Ves nodded in agreement. He held the same opinions as Jim, blunt as he might be.

"That's where the entire mech designer community is wrong." Morgan grinned and crossed his arms while leaning back. "Admittedly, some of you may advance to Journeyman in the next decade or two. That's okay. Mech design is not a race. Just keep in mind that you'll regret it for the rest of your lives if you move on so fast without rounding out your experience."

"Why so?"

"Because mech design is all about reaching the pinnacle in mech design! Think about it. How can you reach the top when you skimmed out in your foundational stages? The moment you advance to Journeyman after

designing only five to ten or so mechs, you are progressing on top of an unstable foundation."

"What constitutes an unstable foundation?" Bart furrowed his brows. Unlike Jim, he appeared to be more interested in Morgan's theory. "My mentor has taught me that a good foundation consists of a comprehensive understanding of the sciences related to mech design."

Morgan raised a finger. "That's only one part of the equation! Don't forget that to become a Journeyman, you need to be more than a good learner. The other two requirements are to design several original mechs and to develop your own design philosophy. In truth, the design philosophy is connected to the other two criteria. It's the goal that every Apprentice is aiming for, and it happens to be the part which everyone is trying to rush through!"

"That's nonsense." Jim retorted. "Most of the Master Mech Designers today are geniuses who advanced rapidly through the ranks. The faster they reach Master, the brighter their future! Anyone who took more than a hundred years to reach that exalted rank has no future at all."

"You're wrong! Rushing through the Apprentice stage is as if you are building a starship with no FTL drive! Sure, you can still build a decent ship without it with fully functional power reactors and thrusters. This is enough to drive the starship from planet to planet within a single star system. However, the moment you want to jump into FTL in order to reach a better star system, you will suddenly find yourself coming up short, because you forgot to install the FTL drive at the construction phase!"

The analogy sounded really compelling, but none of the other three designers looked convinced.

"Mech design isn't anything like building a starship." Ves calmly replied. "As Jim has said, many Master Mech Designers seem fine even if they only spent a couple of years as Apprentices."

Enough hard proof existed on the galactic net to prove his assertions.

"Oh sure, those Masters all seem impressive trying to outrace each other." Morgan waved their accomplishments away as if they were nothing. "To me, they're like toddlers running around in the sandbox. Is Master Mech Designer the end point of our careers? No! Above Masters, there are Star Designers!"

Star Designers! These were the true pinnacles of mech design in the galaxy. Legendary figures like the Armorer and the Polymath worked with the most cutting-edge technologies available to humankind in order to push the envelope of what mechs became capable of achieving.

"What do Star Designers have to do with your theory?"

"If you've read their biographies, then you should know that none of them started out as geniuses. Except for the Polymath, but she's a weird one. Aside from her, everyone else started off like you and me. Average. They were dullards even. They lingered in the Apprentice phase for decades before they advanced to Journeymen. Instead of regarding those periods as their lowest point, perhaps they are actually the secrets to their success!"

Jim and Bart looked stunned at Morgan. However, Ves did not appear to be convinced. "There's a very big hole in your theory. The other Star Designers might have stalled in the Apprentice stage, but they haven't branched out in their design work."

Chapter 418 Eternal Sorrow

The hierarchy among mech designers looked like a very fat and short pyramid. Novices were as abundant as red dwarfs in the galaxy.

Only a fraction of them reached the Apprentice-level, but anyone could advance to this stage as long as they studied hard and received some opportunities.

Reaching Journeyman Mech Designer was a watershed. Many tried but failed to reach this rank despite all the effort they put in their development.

Ves did not have a good clue what it took to reach Senior and Master-level, but it must have been accompanied by extremely stringent demands, because less than one per mille of mech designers in the preceding ranks managed to break through.

As for reaching the rank that went beyond Master, most people didn't dare to dream about it. Even though enough Masters existed in the galaxy to fill up an entire planet, only the MTA only recognized seventy-or-so Star Designers.

Perhaps a few more Star Designers existed who hadn't made themselves known, but by and large there shouldn't be more than a hundred of them across all of humanity.

Their power and influence transcended states. At that stage, even the first-rate superstates treaded lightly around them. Many Star Designers renounced their former loyalties and became independent entities that worked for the common good of mankind.

It could be said that Star Designers transcended their former bonds and shackles and have reached a level of existence on par with god pilots. Both types of humans formed the absolute best of what humanity had to offer and were worshipped by trillions of humans.

Low-ranked mech designers like Ves, Bart and Jim constantly thought about how to reach Journeyman-level. It was way too soon to even think about advancing to Star Designer, but Morgan amazingly already thought about a strategy to reach this supreme existence.

Although Morgan's theory sounded logical, Ves read the same biographies as well. They were mandatory reading in school. Every mech designer should have read at least a dozen different biographies.

"Star Designers emerged through chance, opportunity and coincidence." Ves explained the common understanding on Star Designers. "Many geniuses who have quickly reached the Master stage have never been able to touch upon the threshold to the next rank. Although we don't know why that is so, no one has ever told us it's due to a supposedly 'bad' foundation. Besides, if the only way to get a good foundation is to linger in the Apprentice stage for hundreds of years, then the galaxy would be flooded with Masters right now."

Morgan instantly shook his head. "Ves, my friend, I thought you looked smart, but you fell into this trap as well. Just think for one second about the biographies you've read. Is all of it true?"

That caused everyone at the table to blink. Certainly they told the truth, right?

"Why would they lie?"

"Why won't they lie? Those biographies read like fairy tales or adventure novels! Do you really think those Star Designers went through all that nonsense and transformed into strange existences that has turned them into something special? It's all drivel fed to the masses in order to keep the upper echelon in power!"

Morgan continued to rant about his assertions for a couple minutes. Ves, Jim and Bart all looked at each other with perplexed smiles.

Ves couldn't take it any longer. "It's all well and good to state that the biographies are fictional, but what are their true stories? Just because the early days of those Star Designers don't conform to what is being told in the books, that doesn't mean they adhered to your theories either. You have no proof."

"That's because they're keeping it all a secret! It's a conspiracy against nobodies like us!"

The man could claim all he wanted, but nobody else bought his shtick. After finishing his bland dinner, the rest of them tried to move on from this topic. Ves got to know about his other two bunkmates.

"I've never gone to any universities or institutions." Bartholomew Yi began.

"My father is a mech designer as well and he believes he can teach me a lot better than any school in the Republic."

"So you learned everything you knew from your dad?"

"Correct. I even joined his design team and assisted in developing a couple of his models. They all worked out well. The experience gave me enough confidence to design my mechs."

"Did you start your own company or are you working for dad?"

"The latter. There's no point in starting up a separate company if I'll eventually inherit my dad's existing company."

Bart's story sounded fairly typical. A small but substantial portion of mech designers learned the craft from their parents. Such a teaching method was even more intimate than apprenticing to a Master, because one's father or mother always taught their descendents with utmost care and attention.

That said, the mech industry as a whole looked down on homeschooling. Mech designers who learned from their parents and no one else often ended up as pale imitations of their parents. They knew the theories and could replicate a past work, but when it came to applying their knowledge to develop new designs, that was where most of them fell short.

Ves didn't say anything about that to Bart. He didn't want to piss the homeschooled mech designer off.

"How many mechs have you designed?"

"Not much, only four. Like my father, I specialize in spaceborn mechs."

"That's more than than me. I only have two original designs under my belt, and my second design only came out recently. What about you, Jim?"

"Hm, I only designed one original mech, a nice little light mech. I'm still taking it slow."

It turned out Jim's design hadn't caught on in the market. The disappointing sales figures burdened his company with losses, which forced him to crawl back to the Ronan Family for some money to tide his company over.

Naturally, Jim didn't sound so pathetic when he meandered through his story, but Ves was sharp enough to pick out the truth.

"What were you working on as your second design?"

"It doesn't matter anymore." Jim sighed. "This war has made everything moot. My company will certainly be shuttered without my presence. I'll have to figure something out once the Mech Corps releases me."

Out of everyone in this room, Jim appeared to be the least successful mech designer. Ves got the sense that he had barely made any progress since reaching Apprentice.

Even Morgan possessed a better track record, though that could also be accounted to his age. The older man truly designed a substantial amount of mechs, each one better than the last one, though none of them ever sold more than a couple of thousand copies each.

As they got to know each other, they realized that besides their rank, they had very little in common.

Morgan possessed the most experience by far, but his insane theories caused him to stall in his progression.

Jim achieved the least success, but he could draw on a lot of help from the Ronan Family, either through paying less for raw materials or through direct cash infusions.

Bart grew up in a comfortable environment, having everything handed to him with a silver spoon.

As for Ves, though he only published two designs, he built up everything on his own, though he conveniently left out the role the System played in his rapid ascension.

This caused the group's dynamics to shift. Jim's perpetual resentment made him a hard person to befriend, while Bart's easygoing ways reflected his lack of struggle.

Morgan shifted to become their unofficial leader in a way. No matter what they thought about his beliefs, it couldn't be denied that he really designed over a dozen different original designs. Such an accomplishment deserved recognition.

As for Ves, he fell somewhere in the middle. He was actually the youngest of the group and possessed very little practical experience compared to the others. Yet even Bart spend years to advance from Novice to Apprentice whereas Ves only took a couple of months.

Out of the three young men in the room, Ves burned the brightest and held the most potential. The only reason why the others didn't regard him higher was the fact that he possessed a complicated backing.

In truth, Ves got the sense that everyone felt envious at him for catching the attention of a Master Mech Designer. It made them regard him as a competitor more than a possible friend.

The distance suited him fine. Ves held many secrets, and he wasn't eager to let anyone get too close. Not when he couldn't protect himself in the event he slipped up.

"What's it like to apprentice under a Master?" Morgan asked with some curiosity in his face. "My mentor is only a local Senior Mech Designer, so I've never seen a Master in the flesh. Are they truly magical?"

Ves thought back on the Leemar Open Competition that took place so long ago and refreshed his impressions of the Masters that sat on those tall pedestals.

"They are every bit as impressive as you think. They look human, but inside they are biological weapons dedicated solely to designing some of the best mechs in the galaxy. You simply can't relax around any of them at close proximity."

When Ves personally met with Master Olson, he felt as if he entered a zone in which his judgement became a little fuddled. Back then, he hadn't noticed any discrepancies, but looking back on it made him suspect that being in the presence of a Master affected him in many subtle ways.

He couldn't really tell what kind of influence Master Olson exerted around her, so Ves somewhat doubted whether it was simply a combination of apprehension and admiration at seeing a Master up close.

Morgan sighed. "I wouldn't have the guts to try my luck in Leemar. The Friday Coalition looks down on mech designers that arrived from the boonies. It's truly unfair for us."

"That's the way the galaxy works." Jim added with a bit of sageness in his voice. "People who are born in the galactic center have it best. Anyone else are country bumpkins in their eyes. Even the rulers of the Friday Coalition are

nothing more than a bunch of ants in front of a lowly security officer from the galactic center."

This was the eternal sorrow for those born in the galactic rim. The circumstances of their birth sealed their fate before they could even learn their first words. The galactic center was unimaginably dense and wealthy, but it couldn't afford to subsidize the development of the outer galaxy.

Ves found this turn of conversation to be too depressing. "Our starting points are different from the mech designer who enjoy an abundance of privileges that they take for granted. However, the galactic rim isn't too far behind in pumping out Masters. It takes more than wealth to improve."

That gave them a ray of hope again, though Morgan looked about to repeat his theories on maximizing the chances of reaching Star Designer. Everyone else quickly raised another to forestall his story, thereby avoiding another crisis.

After a couple of hours of relaxing and occasional chitchat, they retired for the night. As Ves tried to lie comfortably on his stiff, cold bed, Ves thought back on Morgan's explanation.

Despite clashing with most of the contents of the biographies of Star Designer, his theory looked like it made a lot of sense.

"Am I walking down the wrong road right now?"

The mech industry placed a lot of attention on talent and potential. Those who advanced faster than others would be considered talents, while those who muddled through and reached Journeyman-level in their fifties were regarded as people who would soon reach a dead end.

The reason why the mech industry placed so much importance on speed was because it indicated that this person had a lot more in store. It was extremely expensive for influences to nurture a Master, and it might not even work!

"Should I change my plans?"

Previously, Ves thought about doing the bare minimum in his Apprentice stage. Once he designed three more mechs, he'd be able to tick another box.

No matter how many times Ves tried to dismiss Morgan's ranting, he mind constantly drifted back at some of his assertions. The older mech designer's belief that you need to design more mechs than five to develop a proper foundation sounded very attractive to Ves.

Well, it wasn't as if he'd be able to design a mech while he served in the Mech Corps. "I'll think about it later."

Chapter 419 Differen

The next days, the Mech Corps began to perform a lot of tests. They wanted to know everything about the capabilities of their mech designers.

Physical tests only formed the start of it. Due to his endowments, Ves breezed through examinations that sought to test his strength or endurance. However, once he moved on to examinations that tested his coordination and how well he played certain sports, he fell flat on his face due to a lack of practice.

His strange performance instantly distinguished him among the crowd of hundreds of mech designers in training unit. Even his bunkmates had to reassess his existence.

"Why are you such a freak, Ves?" Bart asked with goggling eyes.

"Bad luck from a mission gone wrong at the frontier."

"Wow, if can call that back luck, then you are more than welcome to pass it over to us!"

"Haha! I wish. It's mostly my own fault for accepting the mission in the first place."

Besides finding out their physical limits, the processing center also stressed out their cognitive limits. The entire training unit went from examination to examination where they needed to perform specific actions such as memorizing as much pages of a random book in a short amount of time.

While performing a single test wasn't that big of a deal, the Mech Corps seemed keen on carting them off from test to test without any time to rest. This quickly led to a lot of protests from many mech designers.

"Our treatment here is outright disrespectful!"

"Are we training to become commandos or something?! I'm almost falling apart at the seams!"

They mostly complained at empty air, as the Mech Corps never sent out any human face to conduct the tests. Instead, they relied on bots and projections to corral the mech designers as if they were guinea pigs.

The strange methods all added to the illusion that they somehow ended up in a prison instead of a training center.

A lot of mech designers carelessly uttered their frustration at the inane treatment they received. Many of the Apprentice Mech Designers who got called up in the second wave all enjoyed a certain amount of success in their careers.

They expected to be treated with a measure of respect. Instead, the processing center went out of its way to make their lives more difficult.

A lot of mech designers attributed this behavior to the mech pilot-centric focus of the Mech Corps and the wider society.

Only a handful of people such as Ves knew the truth. As a Larkinson, Ves already possessed a lot of awareness on how the Mech Corps worked.

The grumbling of the mech designers couldn't compare to the harsh training every mech pilot endured before they were allowed to enter the cockpit. To Ves, they acted like a bunch of babies.

Out of his bunkmates, only Morgan appeared to be aware as well. "They want to break us down and shave off some of our egos. Who among us doesn't possess a net worth of at least a couple of hundred million credits? It would be hell if they put us all in a base without attempting to adjust our attitude."

Ves nodded. "It's more than that. It's pretty clear that Journeymen are receiving different treatment from us. They're probably being groomed in a different way, possibly to lead over juniors like us."

Even if they knew what went on, it wasn't as if they could become immune to the constant manipulation. Humans didn't work that way. Attitude and behavior came from the mind and body. Both could be manipulated in a million different ways.

If some smart alics thought they could endure the annoyances without becoming affected, they had another thing coming.

Over the next couple of weeks, Ves and the others finished their tests and moved on to actual training. Each mech designer trained together but received individual goals they needed to achieve by the end of the training session.

Failure to comply led to very severe punishments.

Ves pretty much fell into the illusion that he went through a boot camp. The exercises pushed him harder than anyone else. Where as one person only needed to lift a boulder the size of a child, Ves had to lift a boulder the size of an adult.

The training program also sought to push the limits of his cognitive functions. His exercises would be ten times harder than anyone else. Sometimes, the disparity would be even wider.

His superhuman intelligence caused him to excel in brute force cognitive functions such as memorizing a raft of texts or performing mental calculations that might have stumped an average mathematics professor.

Ves also seemed to excel in more creative aspects such as sketching out a mech described in a single page that was filled with abstract words. His ability to visualize a mech from vague and fanciful concepts actually caused others to look like him as if he was a freak.

"Ves Larkinson is a monster. He simply isn't human!"

"Don't get close to that freak. A single handshake of his will break every bone in your hand!"

"Do you think he prefers tall women? Drat, if I knew a hunk like him was here, I would have undergone a treatment to shorten my stature!"

It came without saying that Ves did not enjoy all the attention he was getting from the training unit. While some of the mech designers exhibited exceptional cognitive functions, they couldn't be compared to his own abilities. On top of that, he also possessed an abnormally strong physique.

As his performance became increasingly exceptional, his bunkmates started to distance themselves from him. No longer could Ves walk up to them as an equal and talk about what they thought about mechs.

Even Morgan admitted his inferiority in front of Ves. In his mind, though he would certainly be having the last laugh, he should do his best to keep his head down while he was weak.

"It must be really nice to have a Master looking over your development." Jim sullenly said after a brutal round of training one day. All of them felt physically and mentally exhausted. "She must have stuffed you with all of the latest genetic boosts. How many did you get?!"

Ves frowned as he lay on top of his bunk. He was in no mood to argue. "I only got one. As I mentioned before, all of my other changes are a result of my own actions. There are many wondrous things in the frontier. It's dangerous to wander outside of human space, but that's exactly where the last treasures of the galaxy reside."

"You're hiding something!" Jim burst out and pulled himself into a sitting position on his bunk. "I heard from the others that you shouldn't have even passed through the first inspections! You only got through because you ran to mommy for help!"

"Now that was uncalled for!" Ves barked back. Using that particular word in that manner wore down his patience. "I won't deny your words, because it's true, but what does it matter? I came here to do the same thing that everyone else is doing. I am here to serve the Republic."

"Hahaha! Keep your stupid drivel to yourself! All I'm seeing is someone who is better than us trying to act like he's one of us. Let me tell you, it's useless! You trying to fit in with us is like a wolf pretending to be a sheep among a herd. The only ending that's in store for us is you putting all of us down!"

Ves did not get angry at Jim's outburst. Everyone was tired, and some even held a lot of accumulated resentment. In these kinds of situations, people often said things they didn't really wish to express if they possessed a sober mind.

His mother taught him to avoid such arguments by not getting into them. Therefore, Ves merely rolled around in his bunk and tried to go to sleep.

Unfortunately, Jim took that as an affront. "Are you ignoring me, Ves? Answer me! Why are you here!?"

His raised voice caused the other two bunkmates to add their own voices.

"Shut up, Jim." Bart wearily frowned. "Ves is on a different level than us. That's got nothing to do with us."

Morgan held a very different opinion. "You know, maybe Jim is on to something. I keep thinking why Ves is slumming it out with mortal men like us. Then I realized the truth. He's not an Apprentice Mech Designer. He's a Journeyman!"

His outburst caused the other three to jump. What?!

"Think about it! In every single exercise that the Mech Corps is subjecting us to, he's head and shoulders above the rest. He's beating us up so badly that even our mothers can't recognize us anymore! A monster like Ves fits in more with Journeymen than Apprentices!"

"B-B-But-But-But Ves only started designing mechs two years ago! How could he jump from Novice to Journeyman in that time?!"

"Do you really need to think about it? A Master Mech Designer is capable of doing anything as long as she's willing to spend a lot of resources. My take is that Ves has a 'special' relationship with Master Olson, if you know what I mean."

"That's slanderous!" Ves retorted back to Morgan. He felt obliged to defend Master Olson's honor. "My relationship with my Master has always been cordial and proper!"

"Says the boytoy!" Jim taunted to Ves. "I don't know how a hick like you got lucky and caught the old hag's eyes, but you aren't a real mech designer! All

your achievements are due to the gifts you received! You never accomplished anything by yourself!"

This impacted Ves a lot more than he thought. He felt deeply affronted by the way that this loser of a mech designer accused him of having everything handed to him. Even if he benefited from the System his father had left him, the thing hardly allowed Ves to breeze through the ranks. He worked hard to get to this point!

"Really, it's obvious now that I realize it." Morgan uttered as he pointed an accusing finger at Ves. "The only reason why the people upstairs placed here is because you're here to stir us up! Smearing all of our faces with your inhuman level of performance is another form of torture to us!"

Jim cursed and jumped to his feet. "Bastard! Go back to your masters and tell them to sod off!"

Before Ves could utter a defense, Jim bolted towards the bunk where Ves was resting on with remarkable haste. His exhaustion didn't seem to be a factor as his outburst lent him a lot of strength.

"Get off me!"

Jim started to punch, kick and claw at Ves. It might have been very severe if not for his pathetic amount of strength.

His attacks did nothing to Ves. His body was like a sponge that absorbed Jim's mindless attacks as if it soaked up water.

Though Ves really wanted to punch Jim in the face, he withheld his body and remained on the defensive. He already knew what would happen next.

A loud tone sounded out in the room. Moments later, a massive electric shock ran through all four occupants. Even Ves became paralyzed, in part because the shock mainly targeted at his nerves, which still remained fairly vulnerable.

The shock succeeded in stopping Jim from lashing out. His body shook and shivered as his body completely went out of control.

Half a minute later, the door opened and a couple of black-coated armored bots hovered in. They clawed at Jim who was sprawled on the floor and hauled him out like a sack of meat.

The door closed and locked after the departure, leaving the remaining three occupants to deal with the after-effects of the shock attack.

Ves was really beginning to hate this experience. He had a feeling Jim wouldn't be the last designer to be carted off.

Chapter 420 Training Regime

After that day, reality started to sink in the mech designers. Even the most ignorant among them learned that the Mech Corps did not care about their status and their achievements. No matter how many mechs they designed or how many pilots used their products, everyone started from scratch.

The ongoing pressure from the exercises and the inhuman way the processing center treated the mech designer really took a toll on everyone. No one had the time to smile and chat with each other. They needed to conserve every available moment to rest and regain their strength.

This suited Ves fine. By now, his alienation among the other mech designers reached the furthest point it could go. The only reason why his status as a pariah didn't bother him was because the mech designers didn't treat their closest friends that differently. The constant frustration and exhaustion sent everyone into a pit of self-wallowing isolation. Everyone was too numb to do anything more.

It was at this point that the training regime started to move beyond senseless exercises. They entered classrooms which served them with images of the Bright Republic.

A pair of bedraggled mech pilots leaning against a wrecked mech.

A city bombed to oblivion, only to be rebuilt anew.

An enormous fleet carrier surrounded by a flotilla of combat carriers orbiting around a glittering planet.

Throughout the inspirational visuals, it repeated a constant refrain.

"We are the bastion of reason."

"We are the torch that lights up the end of the galaxy."

"We are all that stand in the way between freedom and tyranny."

In their tired states, most mech designers soaked up the message without resistance. Ves on the other hand possessed a much more potent recovery speed, so he remained very aware throughout these indoctrination sessions.

Frankly, he didn't know what to think either. Most of the footage sounded inspirational, but to Ves they largely fell flat. He already possessed a lot of attachment to the Republic and hardly needed any reinforcement in that area.

Along with indoctrination, the mech designers also started to learn other necessities. They memorized the hierarchy of the Mech Corps, how they should behave among themselves and to the servicemen of the Mech Corps, and what they needed to do if they ever fell into a precarious situation.

It became clear to Ves that the Mech Corps explicitly didn't train them to be servicemen. They didn't fit in the usual hierarchy. Instead, mech designers took on an auxiliary role that existed apart from any existing bureau.

They weren't taught how to handle a weapon, nor did they need to salute to any officers. Instead, they learned how the design teams of the Mech Corps worked and in what place they fit in. They learned the many different roles mech designers played and how their work impacted the regiments that made use of the designs.

"The war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom is a conflict that is fought with mechs. It is vitally important that the mech pilots fighting on the frontline have access to the latest designs. Each mech model possesses their own strengths and weaknesses. Once a vulnerability is known by the enemy, that model loses its advantage on the battlefield."

Regiments constantly demanded new designs to replenish their wrecked mechs and become less vulnerable to the known faults of their current designs.

"Your only role is to assist the lead designer and his main assistants in optimizing their designs. It is not your responsibility to suggest new features or perform additional changes to the design."

The lessons hammered home that as Apprentices, they possessed no right to speak in front of a room filled with Journeymen and Seniors.

Ves really chafed at that restriction. The lessons obviously aimed to turn them into obedient cogs in a giant design machine. Instead of being able to design a part or suggest some modifications to an existing design, the Mech Corps only expected them to perform grunt jobs.

He distinctly felt his competences should have elevated him to a greater role. Too bad no one cared.

Two months went by in this vein. The training program superficially molded them in a way that allowed them to seamlessly slot into any working design team.

After the end of their training program, hundreds of mech designers assembled into neat ranks at an open area. As Ves discretely glanced around, he found that many mech designers looked as if they lost their spirit.

Even the likes of Morgan and Bart adopted the same numb expressions. Both of them dealt with the pressure in slightly different ways. Morgan developed a

tendency to mutter to himself to sleep while Bart often needed to pace around in their dorm before collapsing into sleep.

Throughout it all, the mech designers hardly spoke with each other in whatever free time the schedule granted them. Ves hadn't spoken anything aloud in weeks.

At this moment, they heard footsteps. A pair of hard boots clattered forward as a uniformed officer of the Mech Corps strode to the front of the assembly.

"Mech designers of the Republic. Your two-month training program is at an end." The man immediately began. "Seventeen of you have been declared unfit and are now serving out their penalties."

The crowd cared little about the likes of Jim and a couple of other mech designers who broke down and went crazy. They just craved to return to a somewhat normal society. The arrival of another human being actually provided mental succor to the deprived mech designers.

"The war waits for no one. Although your training program should have been much more extensive, the fighting at the frontlines has heated up. The Republic needs you you serve your state. Are you willing to bear the torch?"

Everyone automatically raised their arms as if they held up a torch and roared a resounding cry.

"Good." The officer nodded. "Your new assignments await. I bid you good luck and hope your work will help save the lives of our pilots at the front."

After that, they enjoyed their first period of rest and relaxation in a very long time. With no expectations being thrust upon their shoulders, they looked around with clueless expressions.

Moments later, they received a new set of documents in their military-issued comms. Ves activated the device and skimmed through their contents.

They turned out to be his new orders.

"Is that it? Is this really the end?"

Some of the mech designers broke their stoic exteriors upon realizing that they no longer needed to go through what they considered to be the equivalent of torture. They were more than ready to move on from this horrible place.

Ves couldn't blame them. He felt the same.

None of the designers shared where the Mech Corps sent them off to. Even though their comms projected the documents before their eyes, it could only be read by them and no one else. The contents also carried a confidential label, which they learned should not be spread without an express order from their superiors.

Ves didn't know where Morgan and Bart would be sent to next, but his current assignment came as something of a surprise.

He'd been assigned to the design team of the 6th Flagrant Vandals Regiment. This wasn't an unknown regiment. In fact, it enjoyed a lot of fame or notoriety depending on who you asked. It was the last regiment of the 3rd Tarry Division, which mainly garrisoned a lightly populated region in the extreme 'bottom' end of the border between the two states.

Ves blinked in surprise at the assignment because the 6th Flagrant Vandals Regiment was a tried-and-true spaceborn regiment. To someone who dealt exclusively with landbound mechs, he was like a fish out of water if his assignment forced him to work with spaceborn mechs.

"What is the Mech Corps thinking?"

He quickly thought about the Flagrant Vandals. Though the public didn't hear too much about this regiment, Ves heard more than enough stories from the Larkinsons who served in the previous wars.

The Vandals didn't call themselves this way for nothing. They served as a dumping heap for problematic mech pilots. Any Larkinson who had the pleasure of fighting alongside the Vandals all mentioned how much they hated the ill-disciplined brutes.

"They're a bunch of thugs. I'm ashamed they are a part of the Mech Corps! They should have been cashiered en masse!"

"Don't think for a minute that you're safe with a Vandal. They'll cheat, scam or coerce all your wages from your bank account. Watch yourself well, and don't ever end up alone in a room with a Vandal."

"Scoundrels, they are all scoundrels! Ever since Colonel Lowenfield took over the reigns, it's gone downhill over there!"

Ves never heard anything good about the Flagrant Vandals. To him, who hoped to be assigned to a more renowned frontline regiment such as the Infernal Hellhounds or the Fire Fists, the news came as a huge disappointment to him. His performance should have entitled him to better treatment.

"Is it because of my complicated situation?"

Perhaps the Mech Corps didn't trust or expected much from him. To a basket case like Ves, it was much more convenient to dump him to a design team attached to one of the most expendable regiments in the Mech Corps.

As Ves went through the motions and let a bunch of bots guide him and the others towards a swarm of waiting shuttles, he started to recall more stories about the Vandals.

Though they apparently carried a bad reputation, they also possessed a lot of ferocity. Nobody accused them of cowardice. This was because the Vandals was one of the few regiments that took up the responsibility of raiding Vesian space.

Whereas almost every mech of the Mech Corps operated within Republic space, the Vandals eagerly snuck past the stretched southern border between the two states and revelled in causing havoc in star systems the Vesians thought would never suffer an incursion.

The more Ves thought about it, the more he realized that it might not be a misdemeanor for him to join their design team.

"It's not like I'll be stationed aboard their combat carriers as they pass through the border."

Ves felt better about that. The only thing he needed to figure out was how he could adjust his skillset to accommodate the peculiarities of spaceborn mechs.

It wasn't that simple for him to design a spaceborn mech without any prior experience.

As the shuttle lifted off from Bentheim, Ves looked around the cabin and figured that they wouldn't be sent to the Vandals. They probably had their own assignments.

Of all the faces seated in the chairs, Ves only recognized Morgan. The man happened to turn around and their eyes suddenly met.

"Nervous?" Morgan asked out of the blue.

"No. I'm excited."

A few seconds passed before Morgan spoke again. "Look Ves, I did some thinking in the last month, and I realized I went too far that day when Jim let

his frustrations take him over. Thinking back on that time, it's pretty stupid of me to accuse you of being someone's tool. Can you forgive me?"

Ves did not know what to say to the other mech designer. While he felt indignant about it at the time, he long pushed the matter to the back of his mind.

"I won't forgive you, but I'm willing to let matters go." He eventually replied.

"Don't be so quick to believe in conspiracies next time."

"Thanks." Morgan nodded and turned back around.

Naturally, Ves didn't believe that Morgan would change his ways. That man still believed that he needed to design every possible mech type in existence before he advanced.

While Ves didn't ascribe to that theory, he found the logic behind it to be too compelling to dismiss it entirely. Perhaps Morgan spoke some truths about the consequences of rushing through the Apprentice stage.

At this moment, he was still undecided about the matter. He didn't know if he should delay his advancement and absorb more experiences or continue his fast-faced growth and break through to Journeyman as fast as possible.

It was a good thing that Ves had plenty of time to choose. "I'll get back to this when I reach the point where I can advance."

Ves leaned back in his chair as the shuttle broke through orbit and zipped towards a floating military station. A whole mass of military transport ships moored alongside the station. One of them would probably bring Ves to the Tarry System or somewhere close.