

Chapter 71: Departure

Dietrich and Ves entered a modestly luxurious compartment where they stayed for the duration of the trip. It featured as much space as half a house. Besides offering two separate bedrooms, it featured an opulent living room decorated with generous amounts of gold and blue, the spaceline's oft-used colors.

What Ves particularly liked was that a door led to a small, private workspace with a secured terminal. With the promised privacy offered by Townsend Airlines, Ves could work on his designs in peace. He planned to do a lot of catching up now that he had time to spare.

"Man, these beds are great! Don't mind if I bring some company over, if you know what I mean." Dietrich suggestively said as he jumped right onto the bouncy mattress of his chosen bed.

Ves studiously ignored the implications of those words as he calmly packed his luggage away. Lucky roamed around the room with adventurous mirth, pawing his forearm against a shiny vase.

"Whoa! Look at the prices of this dinner menu! They're charging forty-seven thousand credits for the top 18-course meal!"

"Don't even think about it Dietrich. I don't think either of us can afford to squander so much money. Besides, we already paid for complementary meals."

In actuality, the Torch of the Vanguard greatly resembled cruise ships whose sole purpose was to tour the most interesting sights in space. The main boulevards inside the ship was lined with shops featuring handcrafted luxuries. Those interested in culture could visit the museums and various theaters. As for those more immersed in the world of mechs, a small arena was nested at the bowels of the vessels.

The Torch was like a city unto itself, one that travelled constantly from system to system. The amount of credits it took to keep it running was astronomical. The frugal Ves disliked wasting so much credits on a simple passage, but that was the price to ensure his safety. The cheaper spacelines all had dubious records when it came to protecting their passengers from errant pirate raids.

As Ves was just about to join Dietrich outside to witness the ship's departure, he received a priority call. He picked it up and met Marcella's ambivalent face.

"Looks like you've got some news Marcella."

"Somewhat. You know you gave access of your Iron Spirit designer account to me right? Well I set some triggers in case anything unusual happened, and one of them tripped this morning. You should head to a terminal and see for yourself what has happened."

Hopefully his account wasn't banned for terrorism or something. Ves told Dietrich to wait and quickly sat before a terminal. Luckily, Iron Spirit's lobby already came installed on the terminal though full immersion wasn't possible without simulation pods. As he entered the game, he checked his statistics.

"What the? Thirty-one CA-C1 Marc Antony's got sold?"

Just as Ves sat back with amazement, he saw the ticker of his sales count increase by one, meaning another of his virtual mechs got sold.

"For better or worse, the infamy of today's incident drew a spotlight to your mechs. I've even received some offers for you to replicate your customized mech."

"Really? Including the codpiece?"

"Especially the codpiece. You don't seem to realize how much of a trendsetter you've unwittingly become. There are already some other mechs who's sporting the same kind of codpiece."

That sounded like he was getting ripped off. "That's my design! They shouldn't be able to copy it without my permission!"

"That's why I'm calling you. First, you should raise the prices of your virtual mechs, at least the ones based on the Caesar Augustus. Second, register your customized design at the MTA so that anyone that wants to copy your codpiece design will have to cough up some money. Third, while it's your personal choice, I really suggest you put up your customized design for sale ingame. I can guarantee you it will sell like hotcakes."

Ves nodded and agreed with some of the proposals. He talked a bit more about how to take advantage of his design's current infamy and the tradeoff between achieving a lot of sales versus keeping his reputation clean.

While Ves greatly valued his reputation, he was willing to put it aside when it came to earning DP. The precious Design Points were notoriously difficult to earn, but right now the unintentional publicity concerning his second ever Marc Antony changed the equation. He quickly called up his status and grinned uncontrollably at the amount of DP he earned from the virtual sales.

"With every five-star virtual mech sold, I get fifty DP from the System. Combined with other incidental sales along with my previous savings, I'm already looking at 1800 DP."

The magnetic pull of earning shiploads of DP had overridden any other practical concerns. His eyes turned into shining gems of DP as he tried to envision what he could buy with the System's most valuable currency. Even purchasing one of the expensive attribute boosts from the Item Store was not out of the question.

"Considering my next destination, I can use all the DP I can get."

The System gave him the daunting task of apprenticing himself to a master. These eminent personalities were spoiled for choice. They could pick from

tens of thousands of hopeful mech designers at any time. The only way Ves could stand out and receive an opportunity to beg them for an apprenticeship was to perform well in the upcoming open competition.

Coming from a third-rate state, Ves was quite aware of his backwardness. His knowledge base paled in comparison to what even the worst novice learned in any of the Friday Coalition's colleges.

"I'm too far behind." He concluded. The inferiority gnawed at him. He already had a taste of how formidable the exclusive knowledge could be manifested when he faced all of those elite graduates in the Young Tigers Exhibition. Ves practically lucked out in reaching the finals, but he hit a solid wall in the form of Edwin McKinney.

Despite their similar ages, the mere difference in where they studied proved to be a decisive factor in how far they could go. A diploma from the Rittersberg University of Technology was worth less than the toilet paper of any of the Friday Coalition's vaunted universities.

"If I can't catch up to my rivals in terms of skills, I can forget about participating in Leemar."

With that thought, Ves decisively tweaked his online sales page. He left the prices the same but he did load his customized design into the game and put it on sale.

[CA-1CD Marc Antony, Male Variant]

Tier: 5-star

Base Model: Caesar Augustus CA-1

Purchase Price: 900,000 gold

Premium Price: 27,500 bright credits

The prices Ves charges were very generous and did not lose out to any other 5-star mechs. He elegantly attached the moniker of 'Male Variant' to the design, as if he simply meant to distinguish it from his genderless model. It sure sounded classier than the alternatives he came up with, such as 'Bling Edition' or 'Biggus Dickus'.

"Well, let's get you to work. I expect a lot of sales from you while the hype still lasts." He said to his latest product on sale, feeling a bit like a pimp pushing his whore to the streets.

He closed the terminal and left the cabin along with an impatient Dietrich. They navigated the gently illuminated halls with their carpets and artwork until they finally reached one of the observatory areas at the top of the ship.

A handful of other passengers stood around or sat at the many benches. They all gazed at the orbital space station spinning above Bentheim's chaotic surface. Their smug faces and low conversations made it clear that they did not hold much sympathy.

They were like gods sneering over the trials and tribulations of the mortals suffering beneath their feet.

Though Ves disliked such attitudes, there was no point coming into conflict with them. From their fancy suits and dresses, he gathered that they could easily crush him by their net worths alone.

"A lot of people are running away." Dietrich huffed as he scratched his stubble. "Can't say I blame them. If you have the money, why not move to somewhere better? Hey, will you move as well if you make it into the big leagues?"

Ves shook his head as he admired the jewel of a planet underneath his feet. "The Republic is my home. It doesn't feel right abandoning my homeland."

Frankly, the System was a cheat. Any ordinary mech designer had to seek apprenticeships from masters living in more developed states. As for him, as long as he kept selling mechs he'd earn enough DP to develop his chosen skills. He enjoyed an incredible luxury over his fellow designers that allowed him to avoid pledging his loyalty to a greater party.

Every passenger and all their cargo finished boarding the passenger ship. The mighty Torch slowly lumbered into life as a fraction of its powerful engines started to detach the ship from the space station. Escorted and helped along by a couple of tugs, the spaceship headed straight towards a Lagrange point, skipping past many smaller vessels along the way.

"All that money sure is well-spent. Evidently our ship is important enough to skip the queue."

Faster than Ves had thought, the Torch reached the approximate area where gravity allowed the ship to jump into FTL. With a disembodiment zip, the vessel emerged into the swirling confusion of physics referred to simply as FTL space. The scientists had a proper name for it, but no one cared.

"Right, the show's over. This is going to take a while. Let's go grab some drinks."

Ves didn't decline Dietrich's invitation. He had a long month ahead of him and he could use some relaxation before he started to go to work. He wanted to use his time well and prepare as best he could for Leemar.

Still, internally he felt insecure. No Master Mech Designers were willing to waste their valuable time instructing an average apprentice. They presided over major organisations that allowed them the pick the cream of the crop. Most masters adopted promising geniuses when they just started their studies into mech design, sometimes even earlier.

To a master, an apprenticeship represented more than a simple exchange of knowledge. A good apprentice carried the name and reputation of his master as he exercised skills derived from his master's unique insights. Thus, a meticulous master was said to emphasize the teaching of their design philosophy.

As Ves followed Dietrich to the entertainment section of the ship, he wondered what his philosophy consisted of. Certainly his meager focus in speed and armor was not sufficient to form an ethos.

"The only thing that's truly unique to all my designs is my emphasis on X-Factor."

He wasn't sure if he could find any similar approach to the masters present in Leemar. Likely he had to keep that secret locked up in order to avoid attracting the wrong kind of attention. In fact, Ves wasn't sure if seeking a closer relationship with a master had any benefits for him. The System already offered him an entire galaxy's worth of knowledge.

"Well, even if I'm not very serious about finding a master, I should still do it to complete the quest."

He wondered what the System intended by forcing him to travel so far away. Was he wrong about the usefulness of a master? Was it worth getting close to one and risk exposing his many secrets?

Chapter 72: Awkward

To planetbound people, the notion of space travel required a bit of explanation to figure it out. Despite the immensity of the galaxy, it mostly consisted of empty space with a couple of stars in between. The sheer scale of it caused those 'couple' of stars to pile up into many billions.

It took a lot of time to travel from one star to another, even with FTL. It was not as if FTL travel was too slow, but it took a lot of calculations and precision to

nail the right destination. A single percent deviation in the coordinates could throw a ship off-course by hundreds of light-years.

Only through vital port systems could ships speed up their navigation. Like lighthouses in the dark, they allowed distant ships to hone in on a location much easier, with much less risk of overshooting their destination.

A highly advanced vessel such as the Torch of the Vanguard was capable of performing the monstrous calculations necessary to jump over entire states. The moment she entered FTL, she was on course to a star system from a neighboring state. Her modern FTL drive compressed an awe-inspiring distance of dozens of light-years to a mere two-day journey.

Not that Ves, Dietrich or any other passenger paid attention to the ship's incredible speed. Technology such as this was commonplace, though on the expensive side.

Instead, Dietrich half-dragged Ves into one of the vessel's many bars. As it was still universal daytime, the rather plain-looking drinking hole looked rather sparse. Most of the patrons wore the uniform of Townsend Spacelines, their tight collars unzipped and faces relaxed as they enjoyed an off-shift moment.

"Hey there! Two Crincho's please!"

The human bartender poured a couple of beers from the tap and slid it over the counter. Dietrich grabbed one mug and gulped down a generous amount. "Ah, this Crincho is a lot better than the swill in our local joint. Our supplier is ripping us off!"

"It's not very cheap to ship goods over to our planet." Ves said as he took a modest sip, still a bit uncomfortable. "And it's not like our planet is loaded. We can't afford to spend as much as a Bentheimer."

Both of them commiserate for a moment over Cloudy Curtain's pathetic economy. The backwater system lacked a robust industrial base that

transformed cheap raw materials into expensive end products. In terms of resources, its asteroid fields only held common junk such as iron ores and ice. The planets also failed to distinguish themselves.

In a universe with billions of stars, humanity did not lack basic resources. Any random corporation could hire a bunch of miners and drop them at a random unclaimed star system. No, what most people paid attention to nowadays were exotic resources, something that became scarce as one left the center of the galaxy. The Bright Republic happened to be situated at the very end of a galactic arm.

"Pssst." Dietrich bumped his elbow into Ves as he nodded towards an incoming pair of passengers. "Chicks spotted at three o'clock."

Ves raised his eyebrow and wanted to say something like 'so what?', but a hand suddenly dragged him from his barstool. The two young men quickly approached the pair of girls.

Though dressed informally, the pair of women looked resplendent. The pair of raven-haired goddesses resembled each other so much they must be sisters. The taller one was sportier and not afraid to show her abs with her exposed midriff. The shorter one dressed more conservatively but had a curvier body. Both of them stopped their conversation and regarded the approaching hunters.

"Hey there beautiful ladies, what brings you here to this fine vessel?"

The girls both giggled behind their raised hands. The elder sister took the lead. "Oh you know, worried parents wanting to send us to somewhere safe."

Dietrich continued to put the moves on the elder sister, obviously leaving the younger one to Ves.

Gulping a little, he said, "Hey. What's your name?"

"Rose. Rose Allemaier."

"What is it you do in life?"

"I'm in my last year of finishing my degree in Terran Ecology. And you?"

"I'm an independent mech designer. I just started my business a few months ago and managed to achieve a couple of sales."

Ves boasted a little about his accomplishments, but Rose's eyes slowly glazed over. Sensing the disinterest, he changed topics. He struggled to catch Rose's interests but couldn't judge if he succeeded.

Meanwhile, Dietrich and the older sister named Piper got along swimmingly. He even put his hand around her hips and drew her closer.

He wished he had brought Lucky along instead of letting him laze about back in the cabin. As Ves conducted a halting conversation with the demure Rose, not making a lot of headway into learning more about the girl.

"It's been fun, but we gotta go back to our parents." Piper said as she bumped her comm against Dietrich's wrist, exchanging contacts. "See you around!"

As the two women left, Dietrich stared at Ves while scratching his head. "Man, seeing the two of you stumble around makes me embarrassed to say you're my friend. Did you grow up in a cave or something?"

"I spent most of my energy on my career. I couldn't afford to get distracted by girls."

The Little Boss gazed at Ves as if he was an alien. "Man, that sounds sad. You should get out more. This is the best time of our lives. Don't wait until you grow wrinkles before you start entering the dating scene. It's far too late by then!"

He blathered on about the art of picking up girls. The man talked with gusto, attracting a couple of other same-minded men who shouted liberal amounts of

advice. It turned into a small show where they all attempted to teach the nerd how to get along with the opposite sex.

Ves only half-listened to everyone's drunken words as he focused more on how he should spend his steadily accumulating Design Points. With the infamy of his model driving his sales, he could afford to round out his foundations. Forget about getting in bed with girls, he'd rather jump into a pool of DP.

"Heavens, you're pretty much hopeless. Nevermind." Dietrich concluded as he threw down his empty mug. "Let's go explore the shops. I'm itching to see what fancy things are available here. There might even be some goods that can only be found in the Friday Coalition."

The boulevards lining the main passageways offered high-end products at even higher prices. Every store quoted their prices in coalition credits, or cols for short. One clothing store charged fifty-thousand cols for a single men's outfit, while an ice-cream store offered deluxe flavors at a thousand cols per scoop.

"What's the exchange rate?"

Ves opened his comm and programmed the device to automatically convert every col price in his sights. An overlay inside his eyes unobtrusively added the prices in bright credits.

He swore a bit at the ridiculous rate. "It's almost a hundred to one. Just add two zeroes to every col price you see."

That meant that men's outfit cost five million bright credits. To put it into perspective, Ves could build a quarter of a mech with that much money.

"These guys are fucking extravagant. It puts the money we paid for passage to shame."

"I have a feeling this spaceline never intended to earn a profit from ticket prices in the first place. This is practically a floating city in space. The passengers here are paying to experience life in the Coalition."

If the Torch of the Vanguard was a microcosm of the Coalition, then that meant their total wealth placed them in the lower-middle class in terms of affluence. In other words, they were nobodies.

"With this much money being spent on luxuries, it's a wonder why those second-rate states haven't cleaned up all the third-rate states in the vicinity."

"It's not worth it. The money needed to maintain their standard of living is unsustainable when compared to the amount of wealth they are able to generate from our poorer territories."

That was the simple explanation. Ves had no doubt other concerns held back these second-rate behemoths. Still, the words he said still rang true. Without sufficient exotic resources, the second-rate states had no reason to expand their territories. It was like annexing a trash heap. It stank and ruined their views.

The high prices ruined their mood for window shopping. They separated from each other as Ves wanted to return to his cabin. With his safety guaranteed to an extent, Dietrich was free to explore the underbelly of the ship where various kinds of bloodsports and duels were held.

"Have fun down there, and don't get pulled into any bets. I still need you to accompany to Leemar and back you know."

"Sure, sure, I'll be fine mom." Dietrich rolled his eyes. "You've got my comm, so holler at me if you need some muscle."

"I'm sure the ship's security can handle most incidents. Though the chances aren't big, I'm more concerned about pirates and other raids. If you haven't noticed, the local star sector seems to be growing more unsettled."

Having followed the news, Ves learned the incident in Bentheim was not an isolated event. Various other third-rate states suffered from similar unsettling incidents. One planet had its fuel refinery explode, causing massive damage along with an excruciating loss of life.

What Ves found peculiar was that the groups that executed these terror attacks all looked different. The group that struck Bentheim agitated against the corrupt galactic corporations that supposedly puppeted the Bright Republic from the shadows. As for another terror group in another state, they fought for the rights of exploited miners.

"If anyone believes these guys are not related to each other, then I'll eat my comm."

He stopped wasting time on catching up with the news and turned to the MTA instead. As an organisation that dealt with all things mechs, it offered plenty of services to mech designers. Ves had already dealt with certification. Now he planned to access their open library.

"It's already generous for Director Chandler to give me a couple of books for free. He taught me there's still much to learn about the universe from books."

Naturally, knowledge taught by an able teacher could not replace rote memorization. The books available in the open library also had its limits. As Ves logged in the MTA's virtual library section, he had access to many books. However, he already saw that most focused on the fundamentals and core knowledge. Cutting-edge proprietary knowledge was wholly absent from the library.

"Luckily I don't have to rely on others to develop my specializations. The basics are good enough for me. Referencing the library will also create a paper trail for me to explain my sudden improvements in mechanics and other skills."

As he recently improved his Mechanics skill to journeyman, he wanted to stabilize his newly achieved realm by reading supplementary books. He filtered out most books concerning other topics and only limited himself to the best-selling primers at journeyman level.

ARTIFICIAL MUSCULATURE - HOW TO GO FASTER, by Master Ricardo Takanata. Price: 153,623 bright credits.

THE FORCES PROPELLING BIPEDAL MECHS: A BALANCED APPROACH, by Master R.I. Ulmer and Master F.M. Smith. Price: 346,535 bright credits.

THE JOURNEYMAN'S GUIDE TO MECH ENGINES, 74th EDITION, by Master Elia James, Master Alice Coventry and Master Christopher Lin. Price: 86,232 bright credits.

Ves practically bled out his heart when he spent his precious credits on those books. Most of the masters who authored or edited those books were renowned mech designers sitting at the top of the mech industry. The three books Ves selected formed the core of journeyman-level mechanics and even with his System-enhanced memories, he could still learn a lot from those books.

The prices were originally expressed in different currencies. Perhaps to those who lived in second-rate states, the prices were reasonable. But for He was certain the purchases would eventually pay off when he assimilated the knowledge, but it still represented a large chunk of his savings.

"It feels like I'm back in college. Well, as long as the ship is still in transit, I have more than enough time to digest these books."

Just as he was about to dive into his purchases, the front door of the cabin slid open. "VESSIEBOY! You gotta come downstairs! There's a pair of nextgen mechs about to duel each other in an hour! Gather up your credits and let's go bet!"

Chapter 73: Underway

The designers of the Torch of the Vanguard shaped it in a lengthy, triangular form. It looked like a stubby rod where the top was narrow in order to provide windows to every cabin and fat at the bottom to store lots of cargo. Thus, the underbelly of the ship had enough room to setup a small arena, shielded by the best screening technology the Friday Coalition could afford.

A large crowd already gathered around the high-tech stadium. Even for the Friday Coalition, seeing a nextgen mech perform was not an everyday sight. Only the elites from second-rate states were privileged to pilot such an expensive and powerful mech.

Naturally, the first-rate superstates treated nextgen mechs as their basic models. The cutting edge generation that they were still developing would be unleashed to the wider galaxy in about a decade. Ves was already apprehensive about the sea of changes that ensued with every generational leap.

"Hey Ves, can you explain to me what's so fancy about the next generation?"

Each new generation represented a major leap forward in a couple of areas of technology. Usually the incorporation of hitherto unknown exotic materials supported such innovation.

"I don't have the details, but I've heard the next generation is largely an advance in weapons and energy storage technology. Lasers and other types of direct energy weapons are more powerful and can deliver a higher burst of damage without damaging their weapons. High-end energy cells are also able to store more power. As for heat management, the improvement there hasn't caught up so mechs running energy weapons won't last as long."

"Okay, so lasers are gonna hit harder and longer but the heat management is going to be a bitch. Sounds like it's ideal for skirmisher-types. What about ballistic and missile weaponry?"

"There's no major innovation there, but weapons manufacturers have reduced the costs of much of their premium weaponry. It basically means that the other weapon types can catch up at the cost of reduced profits to manufacturers."

"Heh, sounds good. Those greedy bastards charge way too much for ammunition. It's about time they get to bleed."

Ves did not mention that armor systems also failed to keep up. That largely meant that battles between nextgen mechs were shorter and more intense. The risk of death increased while the amount of repairs and replenishments was going up. The strategic use of mechs was about to change in many ways.

They sat around the arena and waited for the show to start. It did not take too long for the stars to arrive.

"That's Wolf Greer of the Constellations! His Moonhowl mech once smashed three pirates at once with his Overload Fist!"

A bulky medium mech carrying twin pistols on its hips arrived first. Despite the pistols, the mech was built like a brawler, its main weapon being its reinforced fists. The pilot had guts for resorting to unarmed combat. The shorter range meant the mech had less reach and more importantly less leverage to punch through armor.

"What's the Overload Fist?"

"Don't know. We'll see it in action soon enough."

As Ves admired the Moonhowl's refined lines, its opponent came onto the stage as well.

The other mech weighed a little lighter than the Moonhowl. The large logo on its arm told the audience that the mech named Righteous Sword fought under the banner of the Winston Corps.

"That's Iris Peterson's famous Righteous Sword, one of the best sword mechs of the Coalition!"

The two nextgen mechs met each other in the middle of the arena. After a short handshake, they parted and stood at the standard dueling distance for small-sized arenas. The small setting gave the Righteous Sword a lot less room to run around. As a mech armed with nothing but a single sword, Iris needed all the room she could get in order to leverage her mech's superior mobility.

Now that the duelists made themselves known, the crowd started to make their bets. When Ves heard the amount of money they chipped in, he thought better of putting in his own bet.

Like a rural hick, Dietrich dropped his jaw. "Heavens, did that guy just bet the equivalent of two-hundred-million bright credits? He could feed an entire planet for a day with that much money!"

As soon as the bets tapered off, the organizers strengthened the security screens and greenlighted the duel.

"Start!"

The nextgen mechs exploded into action. As each nextgen mech represented the pinnacle of mechs from the Friday Coalition, Ves was ready to study how far they pushed the envelope.

The spectacle didn't disappoint. The forces the mechs were able to leverage caused the mechs to move with speed and power that put older mechs to shame. The Moonhowl especially embodied this as it sought to charge straight at the Righteous Sword.

The battle embodied the classic match between a brute and a mover. The Moonhowl excelled in straightforward fights and trading hits while the Radiant Sword sought to attack weak points and avoid getting entangled. In normal

circumstances, Iris should have been able to leverage her advantage in mobility, but Wolf made good use of the cramped arena to slow her down.

"Enough of this!" Wolf broadcasted as his mech engaged a set of hidden boosters.

"Damn, that guy's timing is impeccable! There's no way for Iris to escape!"

The Righteous Sword was in the middle of fleeing to the side. Its momentum could not be redirected instantly. By the time it turned, the Moonhowl was already upon the slimmer mech.

As if knowing that any further evasions had no use, the Righteous Sword extended its sword. The Moonhowl shifted its orientation and position slightly by adjusting the power of its individual boosters at the very last moment. This caused the sword to punch through the side armor and miss the power reactor.

On the other hand, the Moonhowl's fists glowed red as some sort of strange energy enveloped the limb. Just as it was about to strike the Righteous Sword's cockpit, both mechs abruptly stopped.

"That's enough! The winner is Wolf Greer!"

Most of the crowd booed at the premature end of the duel. Even if the fist had hit, the damage it dealt might not cripple the Righteous Sword. Ves understood why the organisers shut down the fight so quickly. Repairing nextgen mechs was expensive and they did not want to weaken the power of their best escorts.

Dietrich shook his head, having bet quite a lot of credits on the beautiful female pilot. "Man, this arena is a waste of time if the organizers keep pulling everyone's punches. They don't have the guts to show us a real fight. I'd be better off watching a projection from the galactic net."

The pair split up again once Dietrich escorted Ves back to their cabin upstairs. As Ves wanted to save as much credits as possible, he declined to follow Dietrich outside as he perused the ship's extensive entertainment.

The Torch of the Vanguard slowly made its rounds as it hopped across borders. The distance it traversed within a short amount of time was incredible. That it took over two weeks to reach Leemar was a testament to the Torch's incredibly powerful engines. Luckily, the Leemar System happened to be situated a little closer to the Bright Republic, so Ves could board any standard passenger ship to reach Leemar in time for the qualifiers.

The ship's prestige and its escort of elite mechs from the Coalition deterred all troublemakers. Most of them took one look at the scanners and got scared off by the Torch's immense engine readings. Only the largest organizations from second-rate states possessed the knowhow to build such a powerful ship.

Ves made good use of the time by studying the virtual books as if he was a desperate student about to take his exams. He already learned much of the core knowledge from the System, but the books expanded upon the main concepts and provided him with a lot of good references.

At the end of the Torch's voyage to the Coalition's border, Ves firmly stabilized his foundations in mechanics. He now possessed sufficient confidence in designing a mech with mechanical principles beyond the reach of an average novice.

"Mechanics might not be as sexy as metallurgy or optics, but its the main pillar that underpins every mech."

Perhaps he might still be behind the best geniuses participating in the open competition, but he should be able to pass the qualifiers at the very least. He had taken a brief look at the rules and understood the days preceding the main competition was meant to filter out the riff raff.

"Too bad the hype around my mechs have faded."

His virtual sales tapered off. The Marc Antony and its 'Male Variant' proved to be surprisingly successful while they graced the news, but the novelty passed when the broadcasters focused on other events. Without the constant exposure in the media, the mech dropped into obscurity.

What further nailed the coffin into his sales was that a couple of other designers copied his codpiece. It proved to be a minor trend in the local market, but so many pilots repelled the myriad designs that the copycats never earned much of a profit.

Ves studied the figures and nodded in disappointment. "There's no future in driving sales through unique looks. Excessively decorated mechs don't fare well in the market right now. The current trend is to keep the mech's appearance sober in order to avoid attracting enemy fire."

It might be a different story if the mechs were rated lower. First and second-star mechs often featured brighter colors and more flamboyant touches. However, by the time pilots were able to buy five-star mechs, they were old enough to graduate from academies and pilot a mech on a real battlefield.

At the last day when Ves was about to depart the Torch, he decided to spend his accumulated DP. He already spent a lot of time sorting out his recent gains, so that left his mind free to accept an influx of new knowledge.

"Now what will I upgrade?"

Chapter 74: Another Upgrade

As Ves glanced at his Status, he almost got scared by the amount of DP he accrued. Just a short time ago he still got excited when he earned a couple of hundred DP, but right now his breath caught when he saw he earned more than 5000 DP just from his virtual sales.

"Damn, earning so much DP is a cheat. If even one of my design catches on, I'm set for life."

Naturally, Ves did not think the System was generous. The way it handed out DP told him that it encouraged Ves to develop one good design rather than a hundred forgettable designs. The DP earnings from sales should be his primary source of income. And though he could earn a lot of DP from simply getting one design right, the costs of more advanced Skills from the Skill Tree ramped up pretty fast.

He switched to his Skill Tree and stared down his Mechanics section. Upgrading his Mechanics skill from Journeyman to Senior demanded 100,000 DP. Even if he gathered so much DP, he also had to satisfy the additional prerequisite of raising three related sub-skills to Journeyman as well.

"It's not worth it to go down a single tree if I only have five-thousand DP to spend. I'm better off increasing my attributes or some of my other skills."

With this much DP, it became possible for him to buy a couple of candies from the Store in order to boost his intelligence. Still, just because it was possible didn't mean it was useful. If he wanted to compete against the geniuses who studied at Leemar, then he needed an immediate boost in skills and knowledge.

"I'll think about attributes later when the situation is not so urgent. First up, let's see what main skill I can upgrade."

Though he could afford to upgrade two main skills, he was apprehensive about overloading his brain. Every major category came with a wealth of knowledge that took weeks to settle in. If Ves bit off more than he could chew, he might end up mentally crippled for a time. The last thing he wanted was to knock himself out of the competition before it even began.

Thus, he started to scour the Skill Tree for a modest collection of sub-skills first. After taking a brief look at some of the newer and more exotic sub-skills, he turned down most of them in favor of upgrading his existing ones.

[Alloy Compression I]: 1000 DP

[Speed Tuning III]: 800 DP

[Mediumweight Armor Optimization III]: 1200 DP

[Metallurgy - Journeyman]: 2000 DP

The upgrades to Speed Tuning and Mediumweight Armor Optimization spoke for themselves. They increased the depth of his specializations and would help him make faster and better protected mechs.

As for Metallurgy, he decided that achieving Journeyman level in this field was essential if he wanted to compete in terms of armor. He still remembered the extraordinary toughness of some of mechs that participated in the Fusion Cup. A solid background in Metallurgy helped close the gap and enable him to purchase another sub-skill.

"So that's how they did it." Ves muttered when he finally added Alloy Compression to his shopping list.

Though not the only way to improve a piece of armor plating, it nonetheless provided remarkable results with comparatively little effort. The concept sounded simple. Certain alloys transformed when subjected to a large amount of even pressure. While most either ruptured or ended up as a piece of scrap, some alloys instead successfully compressed into a tougher plate.

"Too bad it requires a special machine in order to compress these special alloys." Ves sighed. Just buying the cheapest model set him back at least a couple of hundred-million bright credits.

Though still outside his budget, he could still apply the knowledge to any designs as long as he did not intend to produce it in his workshop. Not only was it usable at the upcoming competition, he could also apply it to any virtual designs where the game provided him with every possible fabrication machine he could ask. Thus, the extravagant purchase of 1000 DP for just the first rank of Alloy Compression still paid off.

As Ves intended to absorb a lot of knowledge at a time, he spaced them out. He first started with Speed Tuning III and Mediumweight Armor Optimization III. Both of these sub-skills at the third tier provided similar kinds of knowledge in that they were light on fundamentals but heavy on details.

While absorbing the data from Speed Tuning happened without problems, Ves could not say the same for Armor Optimization. His shallow background in Physics increased the difficulty of absorbing the advanced data. He got the feeling he received a large bunch of encrypted gibberish, and the only way to unlock them was to increase his proficiency in Physics.

"That's a thing for later when I have the DP to spare."

Having learned a lesson on the importance of main skills, he opted to absorb Metallurgy first.

"Urgh!"

The influx burdened his mind, but not as bad as the first time he upgraded a skill to Journeyman. Somehow, Ves found that his mind had expanded somewhat, as if his previous experience left a hollow that could be recycled over and over again.

With the help of this boon, Ves focused on absorbing everything about Metallurgy and its varied fields of knowledge. Journeyman-level Metallurgy mostly consisted of learning the properties and uses of the most commonly employed exotic minerals. It provided him with an extensive understanding in

how to use and shape armor plating and gave him a primer on how others developed their own armor systems.

As for Alloy Compression, the sub-skill went into greater detail in how most armor systems improved their specs without getting too heavy. With the right mix of exotic materials, the compressed piece of armor was capable of withstanding much more damage for its weight and thickness. The trade-off for this procedure was that it took a lot of time to process the materials and that a lot of expensive exotics had to be used.

It turned out the original Caesar Augustus model employed compressed armor plating to achieve its lauded durability. National Aeromotives spent a lot of effort in developing their heat-resistant armor, so Ves was a long way in developing armor that performed anywhere near such a great product. At least he possessed enough of a foundation to handle a compression machine skillfully and reproduce any advanced piece of armor so long as he had the license.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Novice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 74

Attributes

Strength: 0.7

Dexterity: 0.7

Endurance: 0.7

Intelligence: 1.2

Creativity: 1

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

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

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Novice

[Mathematics]: Incompetent

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

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression I]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

[Physics]: Novice - [Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization III]

Evaluation: A novice about to spread his wings.

While he lost a lot of DP, his capabilities improved beyond the norm. Ves vaguely suspected that he had surpassed a regular mech designer who had just graduated from a second-rate institution. As for matching the skills of a genuine elite like Edwin McKinney, Ves still lacked the confidence for a rematch.

"Perhaps I've gotten within striking distance to Edwin, but that doesn't mean anything yet. He's bound to develop his skills as well. I can't imagine how far he's already reached."

Life went on. While Ves sorted out his overstuffed mind, the Torch of the Vanguard entered Coalition space. She finally reached the end of her journey.

The Friday Coalition's immense size meant it held multiple port systems. From the Bright Republic, any ship wishing to enter Coalition space first passed through the The Hostin System. As a strategically important location and a prime invasion point, the Coalition forces in charge of this area built it up as a fortress.

Countless mechs and fixed emplacements dotted the system even as the Torch of the Vanguard exited FTL at the edge. A patrol of spacefaring mechs arrived at the ship and called her to a halt. Despite the massive traffic coming to and from the Hostin System, the Coalition still possessed enough manpower to inspect each ship.

As a vessel registered in Coalition space, the inspectors went about their work with haste. Dietrich stood besides Ves as they both got checked out by the incoming personnel. Though Dietrich's status was a little dubious, the identity of a proven mech designer proved enough for Ves to vouch for his companion.

"Man, these Coalition guys sure take visitors seriously."

"I think the recent terrorist attacks have them spooked as well, even if they haven't suffered yet from any attacks."

All of the Coalition troops bore a distinct symbol underneath their Coalition sunflower logo. It looked like a set of five tapering blue triangles, like a fan consisting of five blades.

"We've entered the territory of the Konsu Clan. They're rather strict and uptight so don't pull anything funny."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I've seen enough Coalition broadcasts to know how pissed off they get when someone has their hair out of place."

That was an exaggeration, of course, but it demonstrated the Konsu Clan's values. As a rigid family Clan that never bent their principles, they clashed often against their rival Clans in the state they originated. Eventually they pissed off so many groups that they all banded together against the Konsu Clan, devastating their worlds and forcing their upper echelon to flee to the distant Komodo Star Sector.

One would think that the Konsu Clan loosened up after such a harrowing ordeal. Instead, they doubled down, coming across as even more stubborn and uptight. Only their might as the second most powerful military power of the Coalition kept them safe from outside pressure. No one wanted to provoke the dragon.

"Luckily, the Leemar System is part of the more liberal Carnegie Group." Ves said as the inspectors finished their work. They caught a couple of suspicious characters and escorted them out of the ship. "We only have to tough it out for a few days before we leave Konsu space."

The Torch finally reached her final stop at a massive spaceport orbiting one of the system's moons. No outsiders were allowed to approach the Konsu Clan's settled planets, so the station handled most of the traffic.

The insides of the station embodied the quiet arrogance of the Clan. Occasional trees and sculptures brought in some much-needed vitality in the otherwise sober white decor. After leaving the Torch, they transferred to a smaller and cheaper passenger transport.

There was no helping taking the cheaper option this time. Paying everything in cols ate up a large amount of their money. Ves and Dietrich could only afford to pay for the cheapest option which let Dietrich bring his mech along.

"I think with the recent trouble, this trip might not be very quiet. The Coalition is powerful, but that just means that there are more interests competing against each other."

Dietrich nodded seriously, his customary grin already gone from his face. "I know. I've prepared as best I can."

The Saint Hearst lacked the various luxuries offered by much larger vessels such as the Torch of the Vanguard. Instead, she focused on maximizing her internal space, trying to stuff as many passengers as possible in a single ship while still adhering to the Coalition's laws.

That meant their cabin was simply two bunks, a desk, some chairs and a tiny bathroom. While it sufficed for a simple trip to Leemar, the contrast between the royal treatment they received from their previous ship was too much.

While the Saint Hearst devoted only a small portion of her interior to shops and restaurants, Ves and Dietrich found that most of them were on the more affordable side. Ves bought a couple of fancier-looking clothes that allowed him to fit in a little better, while Dietrich happily tried out all the cheap drinks the Coalition offered.

The one good thing about the Saint Hearst was that she didn't lose out on speed. Her modern FTL drive possessed quite a reach and hopped over many light-years with each transition. As they entered deeper into the Konsu Clan's territory, they started to encounter more populated systems.

The Saint Hearst stumbled upon an invasion after a couple of days. Ves and Dietrich's luck in avoiding incidents failed spectacularly at the worst possible moment. A group daring enough to openly assault a system under the rule of the Konsu Clan could not be anything but a rival Coalition member.

Chapter 75: Pirates

The worst outcome happened just as they finally reached Leemar. An unknown group of invaders brazenly attacked a border system owned by the powerful Konsu Clan. The Saint Hearst immediately locked down the ship and turned off all external communications, but plenty of passengers possessed different means.

"They're not going to attack us, are they?"

"I recognize the emblem! That's the Vermeer Group!"

"That's not a raid, that's a full invasion fleet! They even brought tanks and infantry to occupy captured territory!"

The news became grim when they realized the Saint Hearst got caught in a struggle between two full Coalition partners. The third-most powerful Vermeer Group committed to a full border invasion of the Twin Tigers System held by the second-most powerful Konsu Clan.

"Fuck, I always thought these things happened in dramas. Now that it's happening in real life, I feel really crappy." Dietrich spat as his face turned blue.

Through long-range scans everyone could see hundreds of regimented mechs moving in unison. Any casual mercenary group would get rolled over when facing such an unstoppable tide.

"The galaxy is never at peace. We've been too spoiled in the Bright Republic where skirmishes remain small. After all, there's nothing really valuable there worth fighting to the death."

That the Vermeer Group decided to invest so much effort into conquering a border system meant that this place had something of value. A couple of other passengers had the same idea, and one person who still had access to the galactic net found the reason.

"Spiral ore! The Twin Tigers System has a large deposit of Spiral ore!"

While that meant nothing to Dietrich, Ves looked up with widened eyes as he heard the news. His improved Metallurgy skills along with his extensive insight in the mech industry supplied him with the reason for the Vermeer Group's radical move.

"Spiral ore can be refined into a substance that is essential to fabricating high-density energy cells. Trace amounts of spiral ore can be found in most star systems, but it's not economical to harvest these tiny deposits. If the Konsu clan discovered a substantial deposit in the Twin Tigers System, then it has turned from a backwater in a major strategic asset."

A couple of passengers dug out even worse news. It turned out that the Vermeer Group already possessed two large deposits of spiral ore within their territory. They sought to conquer the Twin Tigers System in order to obtain a local monopoly on the valuable ore. If they succeeded in keeping all three sources of ore, then they were able to dictate the prices and make up for the losses they suffered in this invasion.

"Looks like the unrest outside has spread to the Coalition as well. These Coalition partners sure are ruthless enough to wage war on their own side."

In actuality, it was questionable whether the major partners that made up the Coalition were ever on the same side to begin with. They came together only to defend against the monolithic Hexadric Hegemony. Besides passing some common laws to ease trade and mutual defense, the different partners still held on to their unique cultures and individual pride.

As time passed, the Saint Hearst tightened their suppression in order to avoid panic. Crew members along with armed bots emerged from nowhere and guided the passengers back to their cabins.

A ship-wide announcement spoke once the last passengers returned to their places. "This is the captain speaking. As you may have found out, the Saint Hearst has entered the Twin Tigers System in the middle of a military conflict. While devastating to the population, our spaceline is not related to either factions involved in anyway. Neither sides have expressed any intentions of pursuing us as we announced our presence."

Just as Ves was about to sigh in relief, the captain spoke again.

"Do not misunderstand. We are not safe. Though we may be neutral, either the Konsu or the Vermeer can change their minds at any moment. If you are a person of means and have reason to believe you can convince them to leave us alone, then feel free to approach a crew member. Nonetheless, I don't expect them to spare any thoughts on us. What we may be facing is worse."

Dietrich looked grim as he analyzed a projection of the star system. "When the big boys fight, there's always little boys scurrying underneath."

"We have detected sporadic signs of unaffiliated parties. Though most of them are civilian vessels suffering under the same circumstances, there are a number of vessels that may not hold friendly intentions."

In other words, pirates. The captain prattled on about the importance of staying put and avoid any panic. Both Ves and Dietrich learned nothing new from the speech. Instead, they waited for a key phrase to emerge.

"...Furthermore, to any active mech pilots among you, we may request assistance from you, especially if you have brought along your mech. We are unsealing all mechs in our cargo bay at this moment."

Ves looked at Dietrich, who nodded and started to change from his casual wear into his pilot suit.

"Your Harrier won't keep up with the kind of mechs out there. Even the pirates are better equipped than the Mech Corps back home. Even in the same generation, there's differences in firepower and protection."

"I know, but I'm not one to run from a challenge. I've spent weeks doing nothing but drinking my time away. You hired me to protect you, so it's time for me to earn my pay."

In actuality, Ves did not agree to pay Dietrich anything. He tagged along on his own accord, but neither of the two were in the mood to bring that up. As Dietrich finished changing his clothes, he opened the front door of the cabin and spoke to a nearby crew member. The uniformed spacer nodded and let a spare bot guide Dietrich to the cargo bay at the lower decks.

In times like these, Ves hated he could not join the fight. Though he received basic training in firearms back when he studied mech design, that was only to prepare him as a reservist. Even if the government drafted him into the Mech Corps, all he could really do was repair and maintain mechs. Fighting the enemy at the frontlines was not what Ves ever had in mind.

To calm himself down, he grabbed an oblivious Lucky and changed to a vacuum suit before sitting down on a reinforced chair. Each cabin came supplied with basic sealed vacuum suits and reinforced chairs with sturdy straps in case of emergencies. Ves strapped himself in and made sure any sudden shocks from the ship did not dislodge his bindings.

"Don't move, Lucky. I don't want you to float around in case the artificial gravity shuts off."

Space combat among humans used to be bloody before the MTA stamped down their foot. Nowadays, spaceships weren't supposed to be armed, which cut down on the damage. These days, pirates employed space-capable mechs to secure the surroundings while using boarding troops to invade the

interior of a ship. If the Saint Hearst wanted to survive the pirate raid intact, then it could not afford to lose either battles.

The minutes ticked past as Ves felt his skin grow clammy with sweat. The worst thing about the situation was that the crew did not intend to inform the passengers of any news. Dietrich might have already launched from the cargo bay. Could he manage to fight in the difficult environment of outer space? Was his mech sealed tight enough to avoid leaking the air supply?

No sound propagated from space. Any explosions or weapons fire would not affect the ship unless it happened extremely close. Though Ves vaguely sensed a couple of unusual vibrations, he could not guess their source.

Even with the might of the System, Ves still had nothing in his hands to defend against any aggression. He regretted ignoring the self-defense options in the Store and Skill Tree. If he invested some of the 5000 DP into personal defense, then he might not be sweating bullets right now.

The ship shook abruptly several times. The captain quickly made another announcement. "Alert! The pirates have managed to slip in a couple of boarding shuttles through our mechs. They are drilling through the hatches as we speak. DO NOT RESIST AND DO NOT LEAVE YOUR CABINS!"

Ves swore vigorously. This useless captain could have explained what was going on. Who were the pirates? Did they have a track record of wanting murder, or were they just here to rob the passengers of their wealth?

"Shit. I still have more than twenty-four million credits in savings. I can't afford to lose it all."

Still, what could he do? He did not delude himself into thinking he could slip out of his cabin and murder every intruder with his bare hands. He did not even possess a firearm!

He quickly activated the Mech Designer System and opened the Store.

[Basic Fruit Knife]: 100 DP

[One-Shot Holdout Pistol]: 500 DP

"What?! Five hundred fricking DP for a gun with a single bullet?!"

Ves wanted to tear his hair off. Forget about the pistol, he couldn't even afford to buy the most harmless knife from the store due to his shortage of DP. He made a major error in blowing all of his DP away at once.

"Well, lesson learned. Next time, I'll save some DP."

As Ves sat still holding onto his gem cat, he felt a couple of more vibrations. While he had trouble guessing the origin of those vibrations, they increased in magnitude and frequency. If he didn't know any better, they felt a lot like heavy footsteps. With the cabin's heavy sound insulation, he had no way of knowing any better.

Minutes passed as the frequency of vibrations decreased. Just as Ves relaxed his nerves, a breaching device broke the cabin door.

"HANDS IN THE AIR! DON'T MOVE!"

"I'm unarmed, I'm unarmed!" Ves yelled as he raised his arms. Lucky yowled in fright as soon as two menacing exoskeleton suits entered the tiny cabin. The haphazard depictions of weapons and scantily clad girls made it clear that these two men were not part of the ship's security contingent.

The two armored men practically took up half of the cabin's space. One of the pirates held a massive laser rifle over his shoulder while the second held a smoking laser pistol.

"YOU. WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

"V-V-Ves. Ves Larkinson."

The lead pirate paused for a moment. Ves guessed he was using his suit's internal HUD to look up his name from the passenger manifest.

"MECH DESIGNER. GOOD. YOUR ROOMMATE IS FIGHTING OUTSIDE. NOT SO GOOD. COME WITH US."

"Wait, wait, I can pay. I have credits!"

"WE'RE NOT INTERESTED IN YOUR WORTHLESS CREDITS. COME ALONG BEFORE YOUR FRIEND DOES SOMETHING REGRETTABLE."

The lead pirate revealed a knife and cut off the straps holding Ves in place. "STAND UP."

With one pirate looming over with a rifle and another pointing at him with a thick and deadly knife, Ves had no choice. He kept his hands in the air and slowly pushed off the chair.

"I don't want to get hurt. I'll do what you want. Just don't hurt me."

"RELAX, PAL. JUST LISTEN TO WHAT I SAY, AND YOU CAN-"

The pirate suddenly got cut off as a golden flash swiped over his neck. A soft swish fluttered in the air as everyone got startled. The flash turned out to be Lucky, who landed atop a dresser with glowing blue eyes. A pair of energy claws extended from his dainty claws. The drops of blood that still clung onto its surface sizzled as the heat evaporated the remaining liquid.

The front pirate gurgled for a few seconds before collapsing into a heap. His exoskeleton armor provided almost no resistance to Lucky's sudden strike.

"WHAT THE? FREDDY? FREDDY! YOU FUCKING CAT!"

The remaining pirate went berserk and pulled the trigger of his rifle. A white-hot beam emerged from its muzzle and vaporized Dietrich's bed before turning towards the top of the dresser.

"Lucky! Run!"

The gem cat's eyes sparkled even brighter before he disappeared in another flash. A fraction of a second later, Lucky landed in front of the broken cabin door as the second pirate suffered from an identical case of having half his neck slashed apart by a deceptively sharp claw. The floor boomed as the dead man collapsed onto his brother.

While Lucky deactivated his deadly claw and preened, Ves grew green as he stared at the expanding puddles of blood. His lunch suddenly escaped from his stomach. He barfed right into his transparent helmet cover. His airtight suit automatically detected the danger and subtracted the front plate. After emptying his stomach, he breathed deeply and stared at Lucky as if he was a ghost.

"Lucky, you... your claws. Since when did you..."

Ves suddenly recalled the mysterious box. Did its contents have anything to do with Lucky being able to manifest his energy claws?

Chapter 76: Killer

Ves had never seen so much blood in his entire life. It pooled into a couple of puddles as deep as the carnelian he installed on his first mech. The two bodies of the armored pirates laid still in an undignified heap, as pathetic as the manner in which they died.

"Meow." Lucky released as he retracted his claws and gently brushed his body against his owner's legs. It was as if the last minute simply didn't happen.

"Okay. Okay. So my pet is a killer assassin. Okay. That's too much crazy for me to process."

If Dietrich could see him now, he'd probably slap his back and tell him to man up. The pirates were out to get him and the only way he could stay free was to rob them of their lives.

Over many weeks of interaction with the confident pilot, some of it must have rubbed on Ves, because he recovered after only a couple of minutes. "I'm pathetic. This is life in the Age of Mechs. I design and produce massive machines of war goddammit. I already have a lot more blood on my hands."

After all, did he not sell a mech to Vincent Ricklin, who used it to massacre scores of innocent bystanders? It was not as if Ves ignored the consequences. The true impact of his actions were too distant, and he received some training in college to rationalize his actions.

Still, coming so close to a death caused by his circumstances made him feel extraordinarily queasy.

"I've got to snap out of it. The pirates must still be connected to each other. If I'm right, they must have noticed the deaths already."

Ves snapped back into action. If any other pirates came and saw him dazing around over the bodies of their comrades, they'd shoot him in a heartbeat. He quickly entered the bathroom and rinsed away his vomit. Then he returned to the main cabin and grabbed a fallen laser pistol.

"Tch. It's locked, but that won't stop me."

He went to the half-burned dresser and retrieved a small pack of mini tools from his luggage. As a mech designer, he always ensured he had access to a set of essential tools in case he wanted to tinker on something, or needed to conduct some emergency repairs. He did not stop to mess around with the laser pistol but instead left his cabin as quickly as possible.

"C'mon Lucky! We can't get caught by any pirate right now."

The cat dutifully followed Ves as they both ran down the corridors. Now that they left the soundproofed cabin, they heard clear footsteps, screams and weapon discharges. It turned out that some of the other passengers had also smuggled in some weapons. Unfortunately for them, anything they sneaked past the ship's sensors failed to scratch the paint of an advanced exoskeleton suit.

To be honest, even his pilfered pistol lacked sufficient punch, but he still brought it along. After running down the stairs and entering a random opened cabin, entered the bathroom and shut himself inside.

"Right. Pistol. C'mon and open for me." Ves whispered as he opened his miniature toolbox and started to fiddle with the laser pistol's control module. Though he had no background in infantry weapons, his familiarity with their mech-sized counterparts allowed him to identify almost every component underneath the weapon's casing.

"Alright, so this is the control module. Now how can I disable its identity check?"

Ves had no means of hacking its software. The modern weapon appeared to be an upscale luxury model, so its safety features must be quite substantial. Still, as a compact weapon its manufacturer did not devote too many components into keeping the weapon locked.

After a couple of minutes of identifying what each component did, he retrieved a couple of tools and went to work with his utmost focus. His heightened concentration allowed him to shut off his fear and other external influences. His jury rigging skill allowed him to solve his problem with unconventional solutions.

His hands remained as steady as a machine as he delicately cut off some parts while forcibly welding other parts together. After finishing with the locking

mechanism, he even started to mess around with the energy cell and capacitor.

"There. That should do it." He said as he packed up his tools and attached his set to his belt. He gingerly picked up the laser pistol and turned it on. The lights turned green as the weapon started to accumulate a charge. His hasty tinkering succeeded in unlocking the weapon.

After pressing a button, a projection came into view over the rear of the barrel. The simple figures displayed the pistol's charge and heat capacity. Currently, the pistol showed that it was ready to fire a charge of 200% in a single heavy beam. Such a charge went way above the weapon's maximum safety limits. Only his recent tinkering allowed the pistol to go beyond its limits.

"Well, I doubt the pistol will last an entire day, but at least I stand a better chance of penetrating heavy armor."

Such a weapon was exceedingly dangerous. If Ves did not aim carefully, the laser beam might burn through a bulkhead and damage the rooms ahead. If any passengers huddled nearby, Ves might actually kill someone innocent. He'd be in big trouble if he caused the deaths of anyone other than pirates.

"It's a risk I have to take. I can't sit still and let the pirates decide over my life."

He also wanted to keep Lucky safe. Though the cat mostly acted lazy, he felt a deep connection with what could be his only link to his missing father.

"Let's go hunt some pirates." He whispered to Lucky, and they both snuck out of the bathroom and peeked outside the corridor. "I don't want to take the fight to them, but I won't let myself be cornered either. We have to retake control of the ship."

He doubted the still-fighting crew members appreciated his involvement, but he did not trust them to have the interests of the passengers in mind. Though the laws obligated them to defend the passengers to the death, he

occasionally came across some news articles where the captain and the crew were less than passionate when facing down the barrel of a gun.

A pair of heavy footsteps approached his hiding place. Ves guessed that they possessed sensors that were capable of detecting heat, so they could follow the traces of footsteps and his lingering body heat. From the lack of haste, they probably did not realize that Ves was one of the bastards who killed off a couple of pirates. That was good.

"YOU. IN THAT CABIN. GET OUT OF THERE."

Ves slowly rose and held onto his charged-up pistol. Since exoskeletons possessed all kinds of sensors, he did not bother to hide its substantial heat emissions.

"FUCKER! HE'S ARMED!"

The pirates still remained human. The pair of armored men focused all of their attention to his radiating pistol, ignoring the gem cat sneaking up from behind. As a mechanical pet, Lucky barely released any heat as long as he did not deploy his energy claws. By moving slowly and regularly, he was as inconspicuous as the ship's standard cleaning bots.

Just as they directed their aim at him through the bulkhead, Ves yelled out, "Lucky! Now!"

Like a silent killer, Lucky jumped in the air and landed atop the back of the rearmost pirate's neck armor. His claws sank deep inside the plating as if it didn't exist and shredded the vulnerable flesh underneath.

As one of the pirates gurgled and died, Ves poked out his body from the broken door frame and shot his pistol with haste. His aim drifted a bit to the left, causing him to hit the surviving pirate's shoulder instead of his center mass. Still, the overloaded laser beam managed to convey a lot of heat at a

single spot which spoiled the pirate's aim. His rifle barked upwards well over its target's head.

"Damnit! Lucky, finish him off!" Ves swore as he jumped back inside the empty cabin. His pistol started to smoke and his confidence evaporated. He waited until the scream cut off before taking a peek again. His eyes gazed at another pair of bodies. This time he processed the act of killing without losing control over his stomach.

He managed to approach the rear of the Saint Hearst with remarkable haste after his latest killings. The boarding parties mainly concentrated their efforts in controlling a few critical compartments along with subduing the passengers. As most of the passengers still huddled inside their rooms, once Ves left the cabin area he encountered a lot less patrols.

"Huh. I thought so. If these pirates are still fighting with the mechs outside, then that means they can't risk sending out too many boarding shuttles. They sent just enough pirates to subdue the passengers and crew. If they lose a couple of men, then it's no big deal for them as long as they recover their gear."

Ves did not envy the life of a pirate grunt. Unless they could pilot mechs, they were treated as no better than a slightly smarter combat bot. At least one merit to the use of living bodies was that they could not be hacked.

"Just because the bigshots don't care about their lives doesn't mean they will obediently roll over."

Ves had very little means in repelling the hundred-odd or so pirates aboard the Saint Hearst. The cheap passenger liner's security contingent obviously lacked exoskeleton armor as the dead crew members that Ves encountered sported nothing heavier than lightly armored suits.

He approached the engineering compartment which hosted the ship's engines and the power reactor. A lot more pirates milled just outside the heavily armored hatch. They installed a portable laser driller that was in the process of dismantling the blockade.

Once the pirates had access to engineering, the game was up. The pirate engineers could do a lot of things, from cutting off the connection to the bridge to redirecting the Saint Hearst's course. As a last resort, they could also threaten the entire ship by blowing up its vulnerable reactor.

"Lucky. Can you sneak closer and count how many pirates are there?"

The cat bobbed his cute head and snuck around the corner. A minute passed before he returned. The cat softly scratched a bulkhead with single claw.

"Twenty-four pirates. Are they all inside an exoskeleton?"

"Okay, so they only have two lightly armored engineers. Right. I know what to do now."

He instructed Lucky briefly, then got ready to take action. He kept a healthy distance from the pirates in order to avoid tripping their sensors. He approached a hatch and used his tools to fiddle with its control mechanisms. After finishing his work, he packed up his tools and readied his pistol. The long wait caused him to drip in sweat again. He was about to do something very foolhardy.

"ENGINEER DOWN! PROTECT THE OTHER ONE! SHOOT DOWN THAT BOT!"

The two pirate squads rose into action as Lucky went to town. While Lucky bounced around and spoiled the aim of the pirates by hiding behind their comrades, Ves quickly crept around the corner and aimed his smoking pistol at the drill.

The beam melted the laser drill into a pile of slag. He immediately jumped back, but a pair of pirates who ignored the commotion and kept their eyes peeled in his direction shot their own weapons in response.

A laser almost hit him before Ves rounded the corner. The bulkhead blocked out the beam long enough for Ves to get away.

The other pirate adjusted his light cannon's aim. Its massive size could only be carried by a powered suit of armor. The pirate pulled the trigger, causing an shell to accelerate towards the intersection where Ves briefly fired his weapon.

Though Ves managed to take a few steps back, the shell exploded into a nova of force. The shockwave pushed him off his feet while a small fragment clipped the side of his torso.

"Argh!"

His vacuum suit automatically sealed up the gap and stemmed the flow of blood as best it could. The suit injected him with a small dose of painkillers in order to suppress his agony.

"Damn it, I got hit. Lucky! Get out of there!"

Ves hobbled away as some of the angry pirates thundered after him. He quickly jumped past the closest hatch and waited.

"THE BOT IS RUNNING AWAY!"

He did not have to wait for long until ran past. Now that Lucky succeeded in getting away, Ves slammed his palm onto the hatch's control console. A heavy slab of metal fell down, shutting him momentarily from the enraged pirates.

"Don't fuck with a mech designer." Ves impulsively spat at the closed hatch as a small group of pirates pounded its surface from the other side. He raised his middle finger and saluted the frustrated gang of criminals.

"C'mon, let's get out of here. They'll be on guard against us now."

With his trusty cat in tow, he smartly made himself scarce. While Lucky possessed unimaginable capabilities, Ves did not want to risk his life against two entire squads of heavily armed pirates. Killing the engineers and disabling the drill was the best he could do for the ship. Hopefully he bought enough time.

Chapter 77: Disembark

For the next hour, Ves did nothing but hide. He went all the way up the decks and hid himself in the most useless compartment of the ship, the observatory. As distant flashes of light exploded in the darkness of space, Ves remained still as he laid under a couch, holding Lucky in his arms.

"I'm not an expert on pirate raids, but if the drama's I've seen are somewhat accurate, then they should not take the fight to the death."

The pirate business ran on the same principles as any other company. They invested in mechs and pirates to conduct raids on ships and planets. They stayed around long enough to pick off all of the low-hanging fruit before getting away once enemy reinforcements arrived.

As the MTA enforced a universal law among humanity to band together and render aid in emergencies, the pirates had a time limit. The clock ticked as the other civilian ships caught in the invasion banded together and grouped up their escorts in a formidable force. They'd slowly sweep forward and pick up any isolated ships, adding to their threat as they neared the distressed ships like the Saint Hearst.

"As long as the pirates can't take control of the Saint Hearst, the crisis will end."

After all, losing those expensive suits of exoskeleton armor along with the mechs hurt their bottom line. The Saint Hearst was just a run-of-the-mill passenger liner. The kind of passengers she carried were not the wealthiest sort of people. The pirates only quickly grabbed the most affluent among them, leaving the rest behind. It wasn't worth their time to shake down a passenger with only tens of thousands of cols in savings.

An hour quietly passed as the vibrations downstairs disappeared. The fighting had stopped. Ves did not dare poke his head out or let Lucky scout ahead.

"Meow..." Lucky mewled, his eyes looking dimmer than before.

"Those energy claws took a lot out of you, right?"

"Meow!"

"Don't worry buddy, you did good. I'll be sure to buy an energy cell to top you up again."

"Meow-meow!"

"Ah, so you also want to munch on some minerals? Alright, I'll be on the lookout for something rare once we reach the Leemar System."

A large series of faint vibrations followed. If Ves guessed correctly, the pirates gave up on taking control of the ship. The invaders instead retreated back to their boarding shuttles and lifted off from the ship.

The intercom sparked to life as the local jamming receded. The useless captain spoke again. "Attention passengers, the pirates have retreated from the Saint Hearst but we cannot guarantee your safety yet. Stay where you are and do not move while my men sweep the decks."

Another couple of minutes passed before the entrance of the observatory opened. A trio of lightly-armored crew members took a peek inside. Ves held up his hands. "I'm a passenger! I'm injured!"

As soon as the crew secured the observatory, a female spacer approached his side. "Where's your injury?"

"My vacuum suit sealed the wound. I got cut by some shrapnel from an explosive shell. I'm still running on painkillers."

The woman looked at the smouldering pistol by his side and narrowed his eyes. "Please confirm your identity."

"Hey, I'm not a pirate. I stole it off the pirate I killed."

The crew took precautions nonetheless. They secured his arms with bindings and put Lucky in a reinforced cage. Some spare crew members in charge of processing the wounded and captives transferred him to a secure part of the medical bay. There he received more extensive treatment for his wounds from a medibot while he waited to be checked out.

"Heya Ves! Looks like you've popped your first cherry!" Dietrich celebrated as he entered the medbay along with an officer. "I didn't think you had it in you to slaughter a couple of those pirates."

"Mr. Larkinson, we have investigated your circumstances. Though it is unfortunate that the pirates have scrambled all of our surveillance equipment, from what we have gathered so far, you have been indispensable in repelling the pirates."

"Thank the heavens. Can you get me out of these bindings? I'd like my cat returned as well."

The officer coughed awkwardly. "We can release you from custody, but we cannot let your mechanical pet run loose. Do not worry, he is safely stowed in our restricted storage compartment. You can visit him at your leisure."

It figured that the crew worked out that his pet did most of the killing. Ves did not even hide his tracks, which was a mistake. He turned to Dietrich as the bindings fell off. He rubbed his wrists and left the medical bay along with his guard.

"Can you tell me what happened outside? I sure missed your presence, you know."

Dietrich grimaced a bit as he recalled the fight out in space. "I got my ass kicked pretty much. Those pirate mechs are tough as nails and they came kitted out for space combat. While my mech can still maneuver in space with its flight system, I did not train a lot in zero-g combat."

"You're alive at least. That's what matters. What's the damage?"

"Well, I managed to stay functional long enough to annoy the pirates. They had to redirect at least one of their mechs on pinning me down. That crazy bastard kept shooting lasers at my sweet Harrier. Her chassis has a lot of melted holes and I lost an entire leg."

Ves imagined the cost of repairing all of that damage. Most of the armor must be damaged beyond redemption, which was not good news since it was often the most expensive component to replace.

"Ah, I know what you're thinking, but the spaceline is not completely heartless. They promised commendations for the both of us for stepping up against the pirates instead of cowering under a bed or something. I should be receiving a voucher that entitles me to a free repair job for my mech at any Coalition-affiliated base."

"That's good news." Ves said, surprised the Friday Coalition spared them the cols. Their status as foreigners did not entitle them to many rights.

All-in-all, the impromptu convoy of ships departed from the edge of the Twin Tigers System in a large group. Only by sticking together could they insure their safety against any opportunistic attacks.

The Saint Hearst together with a dozen other civilian ships transited into FTL towards the same destination. Despite the pirate raid, it was still important for them to arrive at their destination in time. Some sensitive cargo had to be delivered on time in order to avoid any penalties.

The Saint Hearst kept travelling towards Leemar in order to conduct a thorough inspection and repair. They carried away most of the wounded and the captives at an earlier stop and picked up other passengers who weren't willing to book another flight. Thus, two days later, the Saint Hearst finally arrived at the Leemar System, one day late.

The mighty Leemar System belonged to the wealthy Carnegie Group. Though they failed to excel in terms of martial might, they built strong relationships with elite mercenary corps who took on much of the burden of defending their territories. Over time, Carnegie Group diverted from the Coalition's trend of looking down from their ivory towers and started to open their borders further to attract talented outsiders.

The Group developed the highly defensible Leemar System as their intellectual heart. The Leemar Institute of Technology together with fourteen other educational institutions bought vast tracts of lands on one of the three habitable planets in the star system and made themselves home.

As a system that nurtured the future elites of the Coalition, the Carnegie Group treated its security strictly. Eight major starbases secured the edge of the star system. Any ship that flew into the interior without being cleared

would encounter immediate retaliation from pursuing ships and hidden weapon emplacements.

When the stern-faced security officers boarded the Saint Hearst, they interviewed a couple of people involved in the pirate attack. Ves was naturally one of their persons of interest.

"So tell me, how did you come to possess a mechanical pet of such prowess?"

"It's a present from my dad, I think. He probably thought I could use some insurance in case trouble finds me." Ves told the truth, knowing that the security personnel possessed all kinds of means to sniff out lies. "If it's not from my dad, then it's definitely from the Future Sons Technology Institution that granted me a couple of old production licenses."

The security officer ran down the institution's name. He paused when he found out the institution had its roots in the dreaded New Rubarth Empire. His questioning eased off, and after a perfunctory interview they gave back Lucky without another word.

"So that's the convenience of a powerful background." Ves whispered to himself as he appeared a little dumbfounded how easily he got out of trouble. Not that he was worried about getting arrested, but the delays could have prevented him from participating in the qualifiers. Too bad the nebulous FSTI was just an empty shell conveniently brought into being by the System.

Fortunately, the caretakers in charge of sensitive cargo recharged Lucky's energy, so the cat returned to being his lively and curious self. The cat meowed in relief at being reunited with his owner.

"Alright, let's meet up with Dietrich and prepare to disembark."

Fortunately, the inspections finished quickly, and the ship received permission to enter the inner system. She slowly headed towards Leemar-3, the furthest

most habitable planet. After delivering its passengers to the planet's space station, the Saint Hearst travelled onwards towards Leemar-2. When the banged-up vessel finally docked with the planet's orbital space station, Ves left the ship along with Dietrich and his damaged mech.

"Alright, we can contract one of the many mech workshops at the surface to repair your Harrier." Ves said as they both approached the shuttle terminal where different vehicles constantly flew to the surface of the planet and back.

"Hmm. I'm eager to see how these second-rate poncies will fix up my baby. I feel naked when she's sitting uselessly in a container."

Both of them bonded over the incident and grew a little more closer. At least Dietrich did not treat Ves like he was a wimp anyone.

The baptism of combat also subtly changed the mech designer's attitude. For the first time, he felt as if his Larkinson blood came alive. He came from a line of distinguished warriors and though he did not inherit his father's potential to pilot mechs, he still possessed some teeth on his own. Thinking about how proud his father must be for fighting back against a pirate raid helped process the potential trauma of his first stint of combat.

Thus, Ves boarded a shuttle along with Dietrich and travelled to Leemar-2 with renewed confidence. He had taken on pirates and survived. The elite, pampered mech designers who he was about to compete against did not look so formidable anymore.

Chapter 78: Walker

Leemar-2 hosted four different educational institutions, all of whom occupied one of the four major continents of the planet. The Leemar Institute of Technology, or LIT, took up the eastern archipelago dotted with thousands of islands of varying size. Its renowned faculties occupied the major islands, with the Mech Development Faculty taking up the crown jewel at the center.

After riding an ordinary shuttle to the eastern archipelago's spaceport, Ves and Dietrich looked around with wide eyes. The amount of wealth and technology on display staggered the two natives from the Bright Republic. They had never come face to face with this level of extravagance.

First of all, almost half of the people in the spaceport flew in the air. Their feet never touched the ground as tiny anti gravity modules embedded in their clothes lifted them up and brought them to their destinations with just a moment's thoughts. If Ves didn't know any better, he'd mistake them for celestial fairies.

The people weren't the only ones who hovered above the ground. The immense spaceport featured an open design many floating plans and buildings, many of which offered expensive services reminiscent of those offered by the Torch of the Vanguard. Only with an abundant pocketbook could someone enjoy the plentiful services of these exclusive stores and clubs.

However, not everyone was capable of flying. Those with less extravagant clothing merely walked around with their own two foot, limiting themselves to the cheaper stores at the ground floor. Only a few workers using anti-gravity platforms or small vehicles could hope to reach the floating structures.

"Man, it doesn't look very special in the drama's, but seeing it with your own eyes is something else." Dietrich whistled as he envied those wealthy second-rate citizens floating in the air. "What's the price of a set of antigrav clothes?"

Ves opened his comm and searched the galactic net. "The cheapest set is around ten thousand cols, or about one million bright credits."

And that only referred to a single outfit. A well-off citizen of the Friday Coalition owned dozens of outfits at the very least. Only the immense wealth of the state ensured that most of its citizens possessed the luxury to squander

so much money on high-tech clothing. As expensive products, the clothes also offered other systems such as temperature regulation and vacuum sealing.

"I can't afford an outfit, but what about you Ves?"

He shook his head. "I'm not going to play this game. If I buy one outfit, I can't keep wearing it each day, or I'll become a laughing stock. It's better to stick to our third-rate identities and keep our expenses minimal."

Dietrich looked uncomfortable as a pair of elite Coalition citizens passed them by from above their heads. "They're already thumbing their noses at us like we're a pair of blood-sucking leeches. We're just another bunch of economic refugees them like the rest of the walkers here."

That was how the people of the Coalition called the people who left their homes from their third-rate states. The so-called 'walkers' could never in a thousand years afford a set of antigrav clothes. They were consigned to a life of walking with their feet and buying from the cheapest stores.

"If I have to make a choice between money or dignity, I'll choose the former every time." Ves declared. After all, he already sullied his career by selling a mech with a codpiece, so how much lower could he go? "I'm certain it won't matter much when it comes to catching the eye of a master. They shouldn't care too much about a mech designer's background, or else they won't call it an open competition."

Ves had studied the patterns from the previous times the LIT conducted the open competition. While the masters presiding over the events mostly took in mech designers who came from elsewhere in the Coalition, they sometimes shocked the crowd by taking in a pupil from a third-rate state.

"Still, it happens rare enough that having a good background can improve my chances." He murmured to himself. While the masters were beyond ordinary

considerations of wealth and power, it did not mean they ignored it entirely. Often times, taking in a disciple offered them a good opportunity to negotiate a partnership or long-term business deal.

As a pair of walkers, Ves and Dietrich were forced to follow the crowd and go through many stringent checkpoints. The LIT not only hosted a number of eminent masters, they employed a great number of professors and researchers. They also taught the Coalition's present and future elites. With such a high concentration of human capital, the spaceport's security personnel investigated each arrival thoroughly.

A stern-faced security officer shook her head as she studied her data pad in front of Ves. "Since your mechanical pet is classified as a Class-2 autonomous combat bot, we can't allow it to enter the LIT without restrictions. If you are not willing to accept our restrictions, then you can let it stay behind in our pet storage."

"What will it take to bring my pet along?"

"We will have to muzzle your pet for the duration of your stay." The female officer opened a box and retrieved a sophisticated collar. "This restrictor can immobilize any Class-2 mechanical pet of a certain size. It won't do anything but track your pet, but it will activate a security screen the moment your pet activates any lethal weapons."

The restrictor might not be pleasant to Lucky, but Ves was hardly in a condition to argue otherwise. He calmly stood by as the officer secured the collar around Lucky's neck. The cat looked sullen and betrayed, as if he couldn't believe Ves would roll over so quickly.

"Alright Mr Larkinson, everything else is in order. Your partner is already waiting for you outside."

As a potentate and and active mech pilot, Dietrich enjoyed a greater level of service, even if he came from a third-rate state. He leisurely sat at an outdoor cafe, sipping on some beer. He gulped down the rest of his drink when he spotted Ves.

"What's the plan, boss?"

Ves mentally checked his internal schedule. "We're late by a day. I hoped we could have time to explore Leemar but we only have half a day left before the qualifiers start. That will take three days, while the main event takes two more days. As it is, we should find some lodging first."

As outsiders, the pair only had access to a small area on the outskirts of the territory claimed by the LIT. The outer area mostly serviced visitors such as himself, though even this region differentiated between walkers and proper citizens.

The differentiation between rich and poor was starker than Ves thought. He witnessed an obvious immigrant using a floating platform to enter one of the massive floating hotels. The flying machine malfunctioned as soon as it neared the hotel, causing the man who stood on it to scream and fall.

The device rebooted after a couple of seconds, but it wasn't capable of arresting the drop entirely. It crashed in a heap along with the man boarding it falling right after. He let out an excruciating wail as his legs snapped like twigs.

The reactions of the people around the poor sod interested Ves. The walkers shook their heads and continued their journey without pause. As for the citizens, some smirked and clapped as if enjoying a show, while others behaved as if they stepped on a turd.

Luckily for the man, the Coalition wasn't entirely heartless. A couple of medical bots floated towards him and lifted him into a stretcher that brought

him to a local medical facility for further treatment. As for how he will pay for it, well that came later.

"This has nothing to do with us." Ves said to Dietrich, who looked pissed at some of the callous reactions around them. "While we are citizens of the Republic, we're on foreign soil now. We have to play by the rules set by the Friday Coalition."

They spent some time visiting the most decent-looking accommodations. Unfortunately, the open competition drew in thousands of mech designers, some of whom came with relatives or a retinue of followers. Most of the hotels in the area had no vacancies. As for the ones that did, they charged a ridiculous amount of cols for a single night.

"What?! Fifty-thousand cols? That goes beyond robbery! That's like digging my grandfather's grave to steal all his jewels!" Dietrich yelled as he slammed his fist on the counter.

"My apologies, sir, but our offer still stands." The bot standing on the other side of the counter responded.

"This bot isn't programmed to offer any deals." Ves said as he pulled his incensed guard away. The hotel looked fairly run-down and ill-maintained. Its garden was overgrown with weeds and unsavory insects. To charge more than a thousand cols for a night was already excessive, let alone fifty-thousand, but what else could they do? They arrived far too late and all the best hotels were booked.

"Let's ask the locals." Ves said as he looked back and made sure their floating luggage carriers were still there. "Maybe they have a suggestion that isn't mentioned in the galactic net."

Too bad the crowd barely spared a glance at them. Their clothing, accents and behavior all marked them as recent arrivals of no importance. No one

wasted their time trying to help other immigrants. As for those who did spare the time, they provided no answers other than to pay the exorbitant fee.

"What did you expect? Fifty thousand clueless mech designers take part in the competition each year. Of course the prices are through the roof!"

Though Ves knew that a lot of mech designers came to Leemar to pursue their dreams, he did not expect the LIT to be so ill-prepared for the influx of visitors.

"They don't care. Those with means can pay any amount of cols. As for the rest, they have to fend for themselves." Ves figured out.

The Leemar Institute of Technology attracted countless hopefuls each year. They only wanted to take in the best. They could have built much more accomodation with the amount of land they possessed, but they left most of it in their virgin state, as if they disdained to coddle poor bums like Ves.

"We shouldn't be the only group who's late and doesn't want to pay the stupid hotel fees." Dietrich remarked as he looked around. "There's no homeless people hanging around. They should have found a place to stay."

He asked around and finally received a clue.

"Check the southern docks." A half-drunk walker said as he sipped a bottle of beer Dietrich bought at a small store. "There's boats there. Not those fancy shuttles, but real boats that float on water and stuff. You can find a place to sleep over there."

Intrigued, the both of them walked through the streets and passed more and more decrepit structures until they finally reached a massive docked filled with rusted boats.

Ves looked shocked when he saw these rickety floating castles. Most of them were built out of scrap mech components! The better-looking boats were

made out of smooth plates of armor, while the less well-off boats used whatever they had on hand, such as limbs or even pieces of the internal frame. It made for an eclectic sight.

"Oy! Over here! We have vacancies on our boat! It's very cheap, only five thousand cols per person! Breakfast included!"

The crier who called out to the pair sat on a chair made out of a mech's finger bent into a peculiar shape. He sat in front of one of the more haphazard looking boats, but by now both Ves and Dietrich just wanted to get past this ordeal without losing too much money. They curiously approached the young man whose smile grew wider and wider at the prospect of guests.

"Greetings gentlemen to the Belladonna, my pride and joy in this beautiful archipelago! My name is Klaus Blayne. May I ask if the two you are together?" The skinny man asked.

"We are." Ves answered as he curiously looked at the misshapen boat. How could it even stay afloat?

"For a single room with a double bunk, that will be ten thousand cols, please."

While Dietrich transferred the credits through his comm, Ves scrunched his face and tried to fathom why a wealthy institution such as the LIT even tolerated these floating scrap wrecks.

As he noticed the bafflement of his guests, Klaus smiled ruefully. "Ah, you are new here, right?"

"That's right. I can't help but wondering, but... why the boats?"

"That's how the Leemar Institute of Technology works. External students like us don't get to stay in a fancy floating hotel. Nope. The LIT wants us to work for it. Unless we can afford our own antigrav clothing, we aren't allowed to

stay in any accommodation on land. We have to build our own floating homes."

This rule sounded cruel and contrived, as if its sole purpose was to demean immigrants from third-rate states.

However, what else could these students do? They put all their hopes on studying at Leemar, and if they managed to pass its stringent entry requirements, they already had a foot in the door. To turn back without attempting to fight was to disgrace their spirit and the people supporting them. That was why students such as Klaus persisted in building their own rusting floating dorms.

Ves had an unpleasant premonition that the open competition might not be so open after all. If the LIT treated some of its students this way, then how will it treat outside mech designers without backing like him?

Chapter 79: Student Life

For a few hundred cols, Klaus allowed Ves to ask him questions about his life on Leemar. While Dietrich boarded the ship and stared at the horizon while sipping a beer, Ves found a random piece of scrap and sat down next to the owner of the boat.

"First off, what's up with the boat?"

Klaus shrugged. "As I said, the students have to build their own accommodation that either floats in the water or flies in the sky. The catch is that we have to salvage or fund the process from our earnings in Leemar. The LIT practically runs on an internal credit system that everyone calls leems. Without leems, I can't purchase components off the internal market or buy access to the scrap yards where I can salvage broken parts."

It turned out the transaction they just made already got logged by the sophisticated AIs that ran and enforced the internal credit system. The ten

thousand cols Klaus received automatically got converted into ten thousand leems under his student account.

"I see." Ves nodded. "So the rich guys can't simply buy everything available by using their parents' pocket books?"

"Hah! You wish. Antigrav clothing is an exception. There's exclusive classes and facilities available only to fliers. A walker like me can dream about getting access. Even if I scrape enough leems to buy a suit, I can't afford the fees those places charge anyway. Trust me, the moneybag students have lots of ways of earning easy leems."

That sounded remarkably ineffective to Ves. Back on Rittersberg, as long as Ves paid his tuition, he had nothing to worry about, so he put his full efforts into his studies.

"I know what you're thinking about. You think I'm so busy crawling on the ground picking up scrabbling for tiny amounts of leems every day, when I could have gotten an easy time back in the Terach Republic."

"Eh, busted."

Klaus smirked and gestured to his ramshackle ship. "I built this boat with my own two hands. While I might be grovelling and scraping for leems, I still have my own pride. Despite the intense competition, I'm still able to stay afloat. Do you know that seventy percent of first year students drop out within the semester? It's a brutal life out here in the archipelago, but those who can tough it out get more than just a diploma."

As Ves stared at Klaus, he recognized the peculiar fighting spirit in his eyes. The LIT evidently fostered a peculiar mentality. "I guess the diploma helps open a lot of doors as well. I envy you and your chance to study exotic subjects that I haven't been able to touch back at home."

"That's right. This is Leemar, one of the centers of mech development in the star sector. You can't find many other places in the local sector that can match the sheer amount of R&D this place pumps out every day."

Too bad Klaus declined to go into deeper detail on the things he learned. Evidently, the LIT strictly punished any students who blabbed about the things they learned to outsiders.

"So do you have any tips for the open competition tomorrow?"

"Heh, good luck with that." Klaus smirked. "You can't imagine how many people are competing. I don't even think the masters are serious in watching out for a promising disciple. How else can you explain that out of fifty thousand hopeful mech designers, the masters only apprentice an average of three or four out of them all?"

"You think they have ulterior motives?"

"Sure I do! I'm guessing that they want to gauge the overall state of young mech designers from the Komodo Star Sector over time. They record everything you do and put it all in a database for further study. I even accessed a part of that database for a research assignment. You can't imagine how much bullshit they put into paper. I bet they even know how many nose hairs you have."

Both of them shuddered a little. Though it sounded outlandish, they could not rule it out for an initiative that tried to record as much as possible.

"So what can I do to increase my chances to get into one of the five?" Ves asked, not even considering the overwhelming chance of missing out. He was not the Ves of the past who only possessed a few mediocre skills.

"I don't know, really. If you ask me, try to emphasize your design philosophy and catch the eye of a master who matches it. You're going to hear a ton of

speeches about design philosophy tomorrow, so I won't be explaining it. Just keep your ears open and work hard."

"So if you don't have a strong design philosophy, you don't stand a chance?"

"Yup." Klaus shook his head. "A lot of students have figured out that the masters only want to adopt a nominal disciple if they pick someone from the crowd. They don't want to go through the effort of holding your hand and shaping your design philosophy when you're already rather old for an apprentice. They'd rather save their energies for their own descendants or promising geniuses at the start of their mech design studies."

That made sense. A master could shape a young mech design student's mentality in any direction by tailoring his teachings. As for those who already graduated, they were more set in their ways.

"That said, don't underestimate the worth of a nominal disciple. You get access to exclusive books and guidance that you can't get anywhere else. You may not get any personal guidance from the master, but you will at least get access to a small part of their internal knowledge base. That's cutting edge research into subjects that you can only dream about."

To a normal young mech designer, that may sound like a dream. To Ves, that held little attraction to him. How could the power of the System compare against a single master?

After finishing their discussion on life as a student at the LIT, Ves and Dietrich went to bed. The boat only had a few cramped cabins that looked more like closets than an actual bedroom. After an uncomfortable night of sleep, they freshened up with a cheap sonic shower and got ready to go to the parade grounds where the opening ceremony was held.

"Good luck at the competition, Ves." Klaus clapped his back as Ves exited the boat. "It's going to be hell out there, so keep persevering. Without willpower, you won't be able to make it to the finals."

"What about our skills and knowledge?"

"Quick learners are a dime in a dozen. If the Leemar Institute of Technology only wants to stuff as much learning into our heads as possible, they won't kick out so many students each year. The galaxy is tough, so you have to fight for what you want."

It was a profound view that Leemar could afford to hold due to its immense popularity. Ves nodded his head and left to find transportation.

Luckily, unlike the students, visitors such as Ves and Dietrich were allowed to board a large passenger shuttle that brought them straight to the parade grounds. Ves stared out the window and spotted plenty of boats below. Most flew elegantly in the air, but around a quarter of them floated listlessly in the water.

"I won't be able to stay by your side when the competition starts." Dietrich said as he munched on an apple. "Don't worry though, I'll be cheering for you at the stands."

"You've already helped a lot when the Saint Hearst got attacked. From what I've heard, your presence was essential in preventing the pirates from pressing the guard mechs too hard."

"Yeah, but I got beat up pretty bad. These pirates only conducted an opportunistic raid. If they fought to the death, I'm sure the only way I can get away is by ejecting my cockpit."

Ves felt depressed when he heard Dietrich's words. He lost a bit of confidence after the battle. Comparing yourself to the standards of a second-rate citizen was poisonous.

"Well, don't drink your sorrows away. I still need you on your feet for the return trip."

"I know, I know. I'm more worried about my mech, frankly. I hope the local technicians don't skimp on the repairs just because I get it for free."

As they neared the venue, Ves spotted a lot more shuttles arriving from different directions. Most of them looked as average and utilitarian as the one he rode. A few looked smaller and fancier, evident of that passenger's wealth. Some appeared completely unique and outlandish. One shuttle even mimicked a dragon with wings and all.

The thing that impressed him the most were the shuttles dropping straight down from orbit. Evidently, not all of the arrivals were forced to wait at the outskirts first. These privileged sons and daughters comfortably slept in their ships until the day the competition started, where they could leisurely board their private shuttles and descent straight toward the parade grounds without going through security.

As soon as they finally reached the massive landing areas, the pair disembarked along with the other passengers. They noticed a young woman wearing a peculiar uniform gesturing at them to leave the shuttle area. She wore a royal purple uniform adorned with a couple of strange symbols and a dark blue sash.

"Hey! Welcome to the Leemar Institute of Technology. I'm Amy Dubois, second-year student at the Mech Development Faculty. It's great to see you all here! Now if you can follow me, I'll get you to the parade grounds where the whole show will start!"

The student acted so young and chipper that the visitors hardly believed she was a mech design student. As Amy acted very differently from Klaus, Ves figured that she was one of those rich kids who received plenty of privileges. If

she wasn't guiding a group of lower-class arrivals, she'd probably be flying above their heads like some of the other guides and visitors.

Once they left the outskirts where all the shuttles parked, they approached a final checkpoint where exoskeleton-suited guards checked each passenger thoroughly. Fortunately, Lucky was still allowed inside as long as he kept wearing his collar. Ves already passed the cat to Dietrich, who held it as if he had never carried a pet before.

"Lucky is pretty smart, so you don't have to worry about anything. He knows he can't stick by my side during the competition."

"Right, but if he pisses on me, I'll throw him off the stands."

The security around the parade grounds was omnipresent. Ves already spotted hundreds of exoskeleton suits patrolling the grounds. What impressed him the most was that they didn't use any bots at all. It made sense as any bot could be hacked or tampered with. It still ramped up the costs.

As a mecca of mechs, the security forces also employed mechs. With his knowledgeable eyes, Ves recognized most of them as advanced currentgen mechs. These were the top-of-the-line frontline models that did not lose out to the Carnegie Group's main Mech Corps. What impressed him the most was that the officer mechs actually looked like nextgen models. No two nextgen mech looked alike.

"Those must be the personal works of the masters!" A designer from their crowd uttered, causing everyone to admire their exquisite engineering.

After passing one final security checkpoint, they walked through a security screen of some sorts that also blocked their view. Once they reached the other side, everyone held their breaths and looked up.

A massive statue as tall as a capital ship stood defiantly as it raised its weapons to the sky.

"I-I-Is that a juggernaut?!"

"Isn't that illegal?"

"It looks melted. I don't think it's functional anymore."

Amy clapped her hands to attract the group's attention. "That's right! Our big old Colossus here is a juggernaut that survived a proximity nuclear explosion. I can already tell you that the side who launched the bomb got mercilessly wiped out by the MTA, but not before this big hunk got slagged. The Rubarthans decontaminated the wreck and pieced it back together as best they could. For some reason or another, they paraded it around for a few decades before selling it to us once they got bored of it. Interesting story, right?"

As the group resumed walking, each of them stopping talking and thought about the statue represented. For all of them, this was the first time they came across one of the pinnacle creations in the field of mech design. It made some visitors feel small, while challenging others to work hard to design something similar one day.

As for Ves, his thoughts remained on the nuke. "There's always something greater than mechs out there. Mechs are not the pinnacle of warfare. Not yet at least."

He wondered if he could one day design a mech that could withstand a nuke.

Chapter 80: The Masters

A massive crowd stood in front of an elevated platform. Over fifty thousand mech designers eagerly crowded the field. The walkers remained standing on the field while the fliers stood on empty air as their antigrav clothes held them aloft without effort.

If so many people gathered in a single location, they'd normally acted boisterous. However, none dared to utter a sound because of the awe-

inspiring figures sitting silently before them. On the podium, a handful of masters stood atop pedestals that listed their functions and achievements. A handful of uniformed students and retainers surrounded the tall pillars.

The other reason why no one spoke was that the giant Colossus loomed right over their heads. It blocked out the sun, casting them all in its gigantic shadow. The effect was pronounced, and all of their confidence sapped out as they resembled ants.

An old and distinguished looking gentleman approached the front of the stage. Age, dignity and an almost palpable aura transcendence emanated from the figure. This was definitely a man who benefited from extensive life-prolonging treatments. If Ves had to guess, this man was more than five hundred years old. That meant he was born before the Age of Mechs, and witnessed its rise!

The man gazed his piercing eyes over the crowd, causing every visitor to feel their breath stolen away. Most did not know who this person was, but the few that did bowed their heads and dared not to meet his eyes. Even Ves had no clue who he was, and that meant something as he had studied the Mech Development Faculty extensively during his travels.

"Are you proud?" The old man asked, causing the crowd to fall into confusion.

Of course they were proud! They represented the future of mech design in their home planets. They were the best of the best, and judged themselves worthy to compete on a higher stage.

"You are young. Pride makes you courageous. That is good. Without enough daring, one will never go far in the world of mechs. The galaxy does not stand still at your leisure. It spins inexorably. Never stand still. Never give up. And above all else, never betray the human race."

The people around Ves fell into confusion. Was this old doddering man about to ramble?

"Humanity is kept safe from alien aggression for centuries now, that we have forgotten their ferocity. The major alien threats are still lumbering, building up their strength for a major offensive. As humans, we are doing the same! We have quietly developed deadlier warships, and engaged in horrific research in more devastating weapons of mass destruction. Do not think that you are the guardians of humanity's sovereignty. In our eyes, you are merely children playing with toys."

That elicited a murmur of disbelief and discontent. This was the Age of Mechs! Potentates received countless privileges as soon as they turned ten and mech designers with achievements under their belt were treated like royalty. To hear from someone authoritative that they were worth nothing caused plenty of designers in the crowd to lash out.

"Our work has value! We are not a bunch of wastes!"

"Have you forgotten your meds? Go back to your retirement home!"

"Warships isn't as cool as mechs!"

"HAHAHAHAHA!" The old man laughed. His sudden shift caused everyone to fall silent. "That's the spirit! Do not be content with your illusionary pride! Fight for your craft and fight for your mechs! Keep advancing and bring the mech world further to the forefront!"

The man turned around after finishing his short and bewildering speech. Half of the crowd gave the departing old fellow an applause, while others still grumbled at being belittled so casually.

An old woman took the stage this time. Thankfully, everyone knew her identity. As the dean of the Mech Development Faculty, Edith Marshall was a renowned professor and a Senior Mech Designer herself. She helmed the faculty for over fifty years, keeping its reputation steady.

"Welcome young mech designers, to the Leemar Institute of Technology's 73rd Open Competition in Mech Design. As the administrator of one of the centers of mech design in the Komodo Star Sector, and I am gratified to see so many hopefuls have arrived to take part in our event. I will go over the rules in a moment, but first, let me introduce the masters overseeing the competition."

Somehow, the surrounding area grew darker, to the point where you couldn't see your own finger if you stretched out your arm. Only Professor Marshall remained visible. She gestured towards the leftmost pillar, which lit up slowly, casting the master and everyone around it in a contrasting shadow.

"First up, let me introduce you to our youngest seat, Master Guillaume Duchamp! At the spry age of 103, he has managed to break through and receive recognition of his peers for his groundbreaking innovations in the application of liquid armor systems. This underdeveloped field is rich in potential, and Master Duchamp has steadfastly pioneered a viable path to progress for the future generation such as you!"

Everyone enthusiastically clapped without reserve. Master Duchamp was a genuine pioneer who persisted in developing a field untouched by the elites in the center of the galaxy. With the partnership of many different research institutions, he managed to lead the successful development of prototype armor that possessed both solid and liquid attributes. It was still an early product that performed only half as good as regular armor, though it did have some redeeming features. One of its major advantages was that the armor could be easily supplemented by 'pouring' more of it in liquid form.

As a relatively newly ascended master, Ves was not very impressed with Duchamp. Besides his narrow specializations, his other skills still fell behind. The only times he designed a pinnacle-level mech was when he partnered with his fellow masters.

Still, as a newcomer, Master Duchamp should also be the one most eager to attract new apprentices. The amount of people standing around his pillar was the least. A true master never worked alone. By apprenticing promising designers, not only could he expand his influence, he could also nurture a group of assistants who were able to assist him with his work.

"At our next seat, we have the eminent Master Timothy Nguyen! He has been a sitting professor of our faculty for over two hundred years, joining just after we have founded it. His contributions has been invaluable in making Leemar-2 a heaven for all things mechs. As for his mech design chops, his previous studies in shuttle systems and his current expertise in flight systems has broken many grounds. He is currently assigned as the chief designer for the Carnegie Group's frontline flight mechs."

Master Nguyen was another old fellow who rose to prominence at the beginning of the Age of mechs. He used to study shuttle design, but switched over to mechs once they became all the rage.

This three-centuries-old patriarch ruled over a dynasty of descendants, all of whom he cherishes greatly. All of his core disciples consisted of his most promising offspring. The only problem was that none of his descendants excelled enough to take over his mantle.

Though he still put a lot of effort in grooming his grandsons and granddaughters, he started to apprentice outsiders to supplement his peripheral influence. It was a pretty decent deal for those nominal disciples who did not wish to get too involved, as Master Nguyen did not demand much from them except to occasionally give a helping hand to his incompetent descendants.

He also remained a genuine master in flight systems, one of the most complex mech components to work with. Flight-capable mechs possessed a lot of mobility and could be utilized in many ways. Flight systems were also

essential in operating in outer space, where there was no surface to speak of for ground mechs to maneuver. Only their immense energy requirements stopped them from being implemented universally.

"For our third seat, we have our pride and joy, Master Meredith Katzenberg! A lady after my own heart, she is one of the most remarkable minds in the field of exotic materials science. Her Katzenberg Research Institute has been a forefront in partnering with many other research organizations into the field of finding more affordable substitutes to expensive exotics that are scarce in our corner of the galaxy. Without her ceaseless work, our mechs would never possess the might to propel the Friday Coalition to a proper second-rate state!"

Everyone rose up and gave a thundering cheer to Master Katzenberg. While most designers specializing in materials science tried to incorporate ever more expensive exotics, the gracefully aged woman instead turned that around.

It was a matter of resource distribution. The mech designers situated closer to the center of the galaxy were spoiled for exotics, and could afford to incorporate all kinds of rare materials without considering their cost. Master Katzenberg recognized that this constant race towards scarcer materials could not be sustained in the remote Komodo Star Sector, so she sought to find ways to replicate the specs of rare exotics with abundant common materials.

Her few successes had been vital in lowering the costs for high-performing mechs. Even if she hadn't been able to achieve a complete success, she still developed many alloys where she diluted the main material with a handful of cheap stuff, essentially lowering the amount of exotics required without impacting its effectiveness too much.

Due to her split focus in multiple specialties, her designs never really excelled in terms of performance. However, they were always significantly cheaper and easier than any other comparable mech. Each of her designs achieved massive sales, which made her extremely desirable for anyone to request to be their master. She had the most apprentices under her wing as a result, though only a few of them gained enough of a success to bear her mantle due to the immense learning required to become proficient in her specialties.

"As for our fourth master, please welcome Master Carmin Olson. She is our most distinguished guest professor, and has contributed much with her unique perspective on mechanical engineering. Her work on ultra-efficient engines has been incorporated into many of the Friday Coalition's endurance-focused frontline mechs."

Master Olson was from the same generation as Master Duchamp. She was actually a genius nurtured by another group from the Coalition, and received recognition as a Master a little later than her male colleague. Nevertheless, her specialization in engines and mechanics was almost universally in demand.

She partnered a lot with other masters when they requested the use of her efficient engines. This exposed her to the inner workings of other masters, allowing her to shore up her weak points. Her recent solo designs gained instant appreciation from her clients due to their excellent endurance and well-roundedness.

As a guest professor, she was destined to move on after a couple of years. Thus, she did not involve herself too deeply into Leemar's matters and kept a healthy distance from anything too sensitive. One quirk of hers was that she showed very elitist tendencies. Practically all of her disciples and retainers came from the upper portion of Coalition society.

"I'd rather eat dog food than become her apprentice." Ves silently muttered to himself. Some of the rumors floating around Master Olson suggested that she was an entitled bitch in private. Too bad she had the backing of an entire major partner of the Coalition.

"Our last master presiding over the competition is our famous Master Null. At least, that is the name you should all have learned. If you happen to know his real name, then please submit yourself to our security officers so we can excise it from your memories."

Everyone laughed at the little joke, though nobody was genuinely amused.

The man sitting atop the last pedestal elegantly waved his smooth and skinny hand that was only possible if he was young or received the best life-prolonging treatment. Of course, his most intriguing feature was that he hid his face underneath a black, expressionless mask.

"I'm sure you have heard the rumors and conspiracy theories, so it makes little sense for us to deny that he is a fugitive. No matter his origins, Master Null only seeks a quiet home, thus he is a living treasure to our faculty. Though we do not dare to reveal his specialties, he has never been found lacking in any field."

As a supposed fugitive from an advanced second-rate state or a first-rate superstate, Master Null acted as an all-rounder, decent in any field but excelling in none. Of course, everyone knew he hid something special, but to prevent his pursuers from sniffing him out, he never publicly revealed his specialties.

As someone with no outward weaknesses and strengths, he was every young mech designer's second choice. Perhaps Master Null gave up on making a name for himself, for he was also a prolific teacher. He had the most core disciples under his name, and even taught his nominal disciples diligently.

Unfortunately, his lack of courage in passing down his specialties meant that his disciples only developed a mish-mash of mediocre specialties. They were good enough to stand on their own, but not enough to propel them to the highest levels of mech design.

By now, all of the pedestals glowed in the dark. Professor Marshall smiled and spread her arms. "Five out of thirteen of our faculty's masters have expressed interest in taking on an apprentice, thus they are now before you. Be mindful of your behavior and show your best performance, because you might be one of the handful chosen to ascend the skies."

Master Duchamp.

Master Nguyen.

Master Katzenberg.

Master Olson.

Master Null.

If Ves wanted to progress his career, he had to catch the eye of one of these eminent persons. Barring the snobbish Master Olson, Ves already started to formulate strategies intended to accomplish such a difficult goal.