

Chapter 1061 Uncontrollable

Ves laughed in triumph as he returned with his prize. He did it! He managed to seek out Venerable Fontain's spiritual presence within the imaginary realm and abscond with a portion of his personal spiritual energy!

The success of this imaginary excursion confirmed several theories that Ves developed about spirituality and its connection to the imaginary realm. There was a lot of potential here. His unique awareness and perception of spirituality allowed him to interact with it in ways completely novel to those who were blind to its existence!

He quickly stifled his laughter and tried to regain his composure. It wouldn't do to attract too much attention from the monitoring system, especially after inflicting major harm to Venerable Fontain!

Since spirituality seems to play a key role in empowering expert pilots, and losing a small chunk of it would certainly be felt by them! Ves expected that his actions would lead to severe consequences for Venerable Fontain, and none of it would be good!

Above all else, Ves could not afford to be connected to the crime!

Therefore, the next day, Ves tried his best to shake off his exhaustion and spiritual weariness and pretended to work on his upcoming mech design.

He browsed through NORA Consolidated's vast library of component licenses which Professor Ventag generally gave him access to at some point. He wanted to familiarize himself with the options at his disposal and the limitations he needed to take into account when he began to work on his upcoming draft design.

Just as the morning shift progressed, an alert sounded from the hatch to his quarters. It opened up barely a second later. A squad of guards hailing from

the Spiral Shockers quickly entered. Some of them carried weapons while others held scanners.

Ves stood up and pretended to be surprised. "Gentlemen, what seems to be the problem?"

"Please stay still while we inspect your quarters. We have reason to suspect that intruders may have infiltrated the escort fleet."

"Are we in danger?"

"We have already found one major instance of sabotage." The guard officer replied. "In light of this egregious sneak attack, we are scouring every single corner of our ships. For the duration of our return journey, we will remain in yellow alert. I highly suggest for you to remain within your quarters for the duration of this emergency. We don't want anything happening to you, Mr. Larkinson."

Ves nodded graciously. "Understood. I won't get in your way."

He hoped that the guards didn't detect anything strange about the cold sweat pouring down his back. For some reason, what he just did last night spooked the Spiral Shockers into thinking that Venerable Fontain suffered a deliberate attack!

His actions single-handedly threw the entire escort fleet into disarray!

Fortunately, it didn't appear that they thought that Ves had anything to do with the attack. After five minutes of fruitless searching, the guards quickly left his quarters, shutting the hatch as they departed.

Outwardly Ves looked mildly concerned. Inwardly, he sighed in relief. Nothing about the behavior of the guards suggested that they kept up their guard against him. They were just searching his quarters as ordered, not expecting to find anything incriminating.

Ves tried to keep the grin off his face as he became more and more reassured that no one connected the incident back to him. While he was very curious how exactly Venerable Fontain suffered from the breach of his mental fortification and the theft of some of his spiritual energy, he didn't possess the requisite authority to make any inquiries.

It was already suspicious enough that he asked to obtain Venerable Fontain's record.

"I should let sleeping dogs lie."

He already got what he wanted, so to involve himself further would only invite more suspicion on him. Instead, he continued to pretend that he was studying something on his terminal while he focused the majority of his concentration into his own mind.

Qilanxo's spiritual fragment occupied the majority of his mental space. Even at rest, it continued to exert a substantial influence on his mind.

His mind slowly firmed up and got used to the pain. Yet that did not make it any less dangerous. He still felt as if a powerful bomb had nestled deep inside of him. Even if the fragment was remarkably well-behaved, its mere presence alone represented a substantial risk to his mental health!

Sitting in the far side of his mental space rested another image. The pale image of a space knight that served as the base model did not possess any intrinsic spirituality. It only carried as much as Ves had been able to bestow on it. He now realized that this process was rather weak and unrefined.

"I can only animate an image to the extent I understand its life."

It was beyond his means to totally reproduce the entire life of a complete image. He had the best chance of doing so with mechs, but at this stage he lacked the knowledge, experience and direction to animate the image of a mech to the fullest extent.

"I should develop another technique that can address this shortcoming one day."

Right now, the base model wasn't too important so Ves left it be. He turned his mental concentration to the only other spiritual fragment in his spiritual domain.

Fontain's spiritual fragment looked a lot smaller and weaker than the one he received from Qilanxo. It made sense as the Sacred God was comparable to an ace pilot while Venerable Fontain was only an expert pilot.

Ves also hadn't managed to steal a lot of spiritual energy in his last excursion into the imaginary realm. While he couldn't quantify how much spiritual energy he absconded with, he figured it wasn't very much.

He made some estimations based on the relative size and proportion between the balls of gas and the huge size of Fontain's mental fortification. Ves concluded that he may have only nabbed less than a single percent of the expert pilot's total spiritual energy at most.

Tiny as it was, the spiritual fragment carried Venerable Fontain's imprint, and that turned it into a valuable resource for his current design project. With this fragment along with what he learned from the expert pilot's record, Ves would be able to repurpose it into the finest human myth he had ever conceived!

Right now, Ves was at the cusp of shaping the three images and combining them together. Comparing their relative strengths, he was afraid that Qilanxo's spiritual fragment would be so strong that it would outright wipe out the other two images when they approached.

"I can't let that happen."

As he shaped the fragments into a form that resembled his images but better, he tried to communicate with the fragments.

He had no luck with Venerable Fontain's spiritual fragment. It seemed to be governed by a remnant of Fontain's will, and it somehow knew it landed in hostile territory.

Considering that Ves did not base the X-Factor of his upcoming design around the human myth, he didn't bother trying to beat it into submission.

Instead, he intended to let Qilanxo's spiritual fragment do all the heavy lifting. The only problem was that Ves wanted it to subsume the weaker fragment without annihilating it entirely. How could he get it to cooperate?

"Maybe I should just ask."

Ves concentrated even deeper and tried to commune with Qilanxo's spiritual fragment. He mentally directed its attention to the other two images and tried to convey two powerful concepts.

Predation.

Assimilation.

Just those two words. As Ves was afraid that a derivative of Qilanxo's consciousness wouldn't be able to understand the meaning of those two words, he conveyed his own understanding of them along with his messages.

The spiritual fragment flared. It understood his intentions. Quicker than he thought possible, it blazed across his mental space and gobbled up the image of the base model and Fontain's spiritual fragment!

After that, it returned to the center of his mind and began to experience several convulsions as it added on new traits!

The spikes of pain that accompanied this transformation quickly broke up Ves' concentration and kicked his consciousness out of his own mental space.

"Ahh!" Ves nursed his head. "This damn headache is getting worse."

He hoped that Qilanxo's spiritual fragment would have enough sense to incorporate the right traits from its meals.

As Ves waited for hours, the spiritual fragment eventually finished its digestion. When Ves tentatively reentered his mental space, he did not spot too many differences. The powerful flame that represented the fragment still carried a strong imprint of Qilanxo's consciousness. Only minute portions of the base role and the human myth had been added to its existence, with the latter playing a slightly more substantial role.

Ves inwardly sighed. "This is the best I can do for the moment."

That wasn't entirely true. Ves suspected that he could repeat his earlier excursion and pay another visit to Venerable Fontain's spiritual presence within the imaginary realm.

If the damage that Ves previously inflicted was as serious as he thought, then the hole in the shell may not have been patched up yet!

Yet Ves instantly dashed that thought from his mind. While it sounded great if he could strengthen the human myth component of his Triple Division technique, the risks far outweighed the benefits.

Venerable Fontain would certainly be on guard against intrusions now!

"I'd be a fool to return to the scene of the crime so shortly after the first violation."

He learned an important lesson here. If he wanted to obtain a stronger spiritual fragment from someone in the future, he better to it right the very first time!

As the slightly-improved spiritual fragment started to stabilize, Ves tentatively believed it was ready to be put to use in helping him design his next mech.

Ves took a deep breath and activated the design software on his terminal.

Working with an active and independent spiritual fragment that mainly carried Qilanxo's imprint rather than his own demanded a change in his approach.

Before he worked with spiritual fragments, Ves pretty much controlled his images as if they were puppets. Even if they contained some spark of life, they were undeniably figments of his own imagination, so Ves exerted a very strong influence over their imaginary lives.

This time was different. Qilanxo's spiritual fragment only carried a minute portion of his imprint due to assimilating the image of the base model which fully spring from his own mind.

Ves made another important observation. Whether he could control an image or a spiritual fragment depended on the source of their imprints!

"I subconsciously program my own images to be obedient to me." Ves surmised.

He knew he was a bit of a control freak. Whenever he created an image, he would always seek to keep them under his thumb. There was no sense in conjuring up a bomb that exploded in his face.

It was different with Qilanxo's powerful spiritual fragment that had been slightly augmented by the assimilation of the base model and human myth. Despite consisting of only a tiny portion of Qilanxo's vast spirit, it was far stronger than any spiritual strength that Ves could ever muster!

"If I can't control the fragment, I'll have to negotiate with it instead!"

In order for Ves to make use of the augmented spiritual fragment, he needed to coax it into cooperating with his design work.

Fortunately, the powerful fragment proved cooperative to his overtures. Qilanxo's good impression on Ves carried over to the spiritual fragment she

freely bestowed to him. Having the fragment's cooperation made his life much easier as it barely took any effort for him to get it to cooperate.

Ves realized that he might not be so lucky next time when he embarked on another design project.

Not every fragment would have a good impression of him, as Venerable Fontain's spiritual fragment already demonstrated.

"I'll have to beat them into submission or find some way to make them more pliable. There's no way I can entrust a hostile entity to assist in my design work." He muttered.

Chapter 1062 Outrageous Thought

After embarking on several metaphysical experiments that led to a lot of new discoveries, Ves found comfort in returning to familiar ground.

While the new techniques he developed possessed a strong connection to his design philosophy, Ves sometimes felt he was engaging in magic rather than mech design. It felt good for him to resume his identity as an engineer rather than wizard.

"I can only handle so much weird stuff at a time."

Ves was afraid of pushing the envelope even further. So far, most of his theories panned out, but it could all come down like a house of cards if he pushed against the limits of what was possible. He still wanted to confirm whether the changes he made would actually improve the X-Factor of his upcoming design.

"More is not always better. My experiment can still backfire on me if I handle it improperly."

Designing mechs centered him in a way that nothing else could. He embraced his old routine as he slowly developed his draft design.

The only difference was that he felt as if he hosted a second consciousness in his mind that mentally looked over his shoulder. Extending a connection to the augmented spiritual fragment and having it ride on his shoulder as he designed his mech felt as if he was emulating his previous Mastery experiences.

He found himself narrating every design decision, which slowed down his progress but also insured he was very thorough with his work. He had to be in order to justify his design choices to the spiritual fragment.

On its part, the augmented spiritual fragment provided quite a lot of suggestions. The image of the base model that it assimilated beforehand granted the image a good understanding of space knights. In fact, the fragment's knowledge was derived from Ves' own understanding of space knights!

This realization gave Ves a brilliant idea.

"If the knowledge imparted to the images are acquired from the source, why not borrow it from another mech designer?"

The Triple Division technique started with three sources and combined them into one.

Ves started with the notion of basing the image of the totem animal to an actual existing animal or exobeast. While Qilanxo was one of the most powerful exobeasts that Ves had ever encountered, the galaxy offered many wondrous forms of life. As long as he looked hard enough, he would probably be able to find another majestic exobeast to serve as his totem animal, though it likely wouldn't be as strong as Qilanxo on a spiritual level.

As for the human myth, Ves already decided upon borrowing spiritual fragments from living expert pilots. Although the ethics of his actions were

rather questionable, he was willing to go through great lengths as long as he managed to empower his mech designs!

Still, the implications of his latest idea took him aback. It wasn't enough for him to steal spiritual energy from a mech pilot. Now he was already plotting to do the same to his fellow mech designers!

"They'll have to be at least Journeymen if I want to obtain anything substantial."

While Ves did not have a complete picture on how mech designers made use of their design philosophies, he knew that if he wanted to empower the images of his base models, he needed to obtain a chunk of it somehow.

Design philosophies represented the core of a mech designer's values, beliefs, biases, design style and aspirations. It served as the nucleus of their specialty and played a key role in distinguishing their mech designs from the works of others!

Ves instinctively knew that they would suffer a substantial amount of harm if he attempted to chip away a chunk of their design philosophies. He also knew that mech designers guarded their design philosophies jealously and only imparted them to their direct disciples.

Yet the possible gains attracted him immensely. If his speculation was right, he would finally be able to complete the trifecta of making use of three empowered images, thereby upgrading the Triple Division technique to an entirely new height!

He strongly believed that empowering all of his weak and insubstantial images with distinct spiritual fragments was a viable way forward! While it was likely not the only method he could use to achieve higher grades of X-Factor, it was the only one he could come up with right now that was within his reach!

Yet... a sliver of doubt crept up in his mind. Compared to borrowing or stealing spiritual fragments to dumb exobeast and technically illiterate expert pilots, stealing another mech designer's design philosophy sounded exceptionally risky!

"Mech designers are intimately familiar with their own design philosophies. How could they not recognize an echo of their own work when I borrow a portion of their own design philosophies?"

Ves was also afraid that making use of another mech designer's design philosophy would contaminate his mech design and muddle up the influence of his own design philosophy. He needed to be exceedingly careful and deliberate on his approach lest he screw up in the process.

While the idea sounded incredibly compelling right now, Ves resisted the urge to embark on yet another detour. The abnormal strength of Qilanxo's spiritual fragment already insured it overpowered every other fragment.

Even if Ves recklessly enacted his plans and stole some chunks of a colleague's design philosophy, the vast majority of it would likely become crushed by Qilanxo's awesome spiritual might.

"My current design project is very much centered around Qilanxo, and that's fine."

Ves wanted to design an extreme mech design unconstrained by the prevailing trends in the mech industry.

Imparting his design with a strong bias from Qilanxo might result in unexpected surprises when a mech pilot interfaced with his mech. He looked forward to seeing what would happen when a mech pilot came under the influence of an X-Factor boosted by an abnormally powerful spiritual fragment.

Of course, Ves did not wish that all of his mech designs became so extreme. Pursuing balance was a necessity if he wanted to appeal to the broadest

audience possible. This was also why he valued this latest insight so much. The thought of being able to balance out the three elements of his Triple Division technique was incredibly tempting.

"It's easier to pick the right targets when it comes to mech designers."

Most successful mech designers ran their own companies and published their work openly. Ves could easily study their public record and most of their mech designs from the public databases of the MTA.

"If I want to design a knight mech, I should target a mech designer who specializes in designing knight mechs. If I want to design a rifleman mech, I should target a mech designer who excels in designing rifleman mechs."

Most mech designers didn't dedicate themselves to designing a single type of mechs. While Ves would still be able to obtain something useful out of stealing a portion of their design philosophies, most of it would be irrelevant junk that wouldn't impart the traits he sought for in his images of the base model of his intended mech designs.

"Purity matters more than quality or quantity. The fragments that I want to obtain will need to be relevant to the design at hand. Where better to find them than from mech designers dedicated to a single type?"

He envisioned the process as a way to get a fellow mech designer to co-design his own mech! Naturally, the secretive, dubious and harmful nature of this action didn't give the co-designer any choice.

Ves was basically attempting to force another mech designer to contribute to his mech design without their consent!

He couldn't help but smirk at the outrageous thought. "It's fine as long as I don't get caught. I'll have to figure out a way to hide my traces while I do it, and that will take a while."

He returned to drafting his upcoming mech design. Due to his latest insights, he was in a good mood. His work easily took shape and Ves didn't get stuck very often during the drafting phase.

Still, his vision for his upcoming mech design was so complicated that it would take weeks for him to finish drawing up his draft design. He merely managed to complete half of his draft before the escort fleet finally crossed back into the Bright Republic and returned to the New Foundation System.

Throughout the entire journey, the Spiral Shockers kept up their guard and continued to search their ships for anything connected to the attack on Venerable Fontain. They failed to uncover anything amiss.

Even so, Ves still felt the tension among the elite servicemen as he emerged from his quarters with a floating luggage trunk trailing behind him. He tipped his head at the guards who escorted him out of the Lormant Carnival.

"I heard that Venerable Fontain suffered an injury of sorts." He asked as casually as possible while they strode towards the main hatch of the light carrier. "Is he okay?"

"Venerable Fontain's condition is classified."

Figures. Ves gave up on his attempts to squeeze any information out of the guards. They were too well-disciplined to gossip away vital information.

As Ves exited the ship, he emerged in an enclosed section of a military space station. Most of the attachés split up and went their separate ways, taking transits that brought them back to different parts of the Bright Republic.

Ves was in a strange situation where he didn't have any posts he could return to after he completed his current assignment. Alistair Cordwraith found him shortly afterwards and took him to a transit shuttle that brought them down to the surface of New Foundation V.

"The war is about to end, so the Mech Corps won't bother with giving you a new assignment." Senator Tovar's executive assistant explained while the shuttle breached the atmosphere. "Senator Tovar has arranged a number of ceremonies to celebrate the peace talks. We are holding them in order to build up political support for the ratification of the peace treaty in the Bright Senate, so you will have to dress impeccably for these gatherings."

"I think I have had my fill of formal gatherings." Ves said mildly while trying to hold back his groan. "Please, I don't think you will need my presence and my shiny medals. I'm not used to mingling with high officials and they won't see me as anything other than a curiosity at this point. Can I please skip attending these ceremonies?"

Mr. Cordwraith turned his head and looked at Ves in an askance expression. "We are offering you an opportunity here. Many important politicians, businessmen, military officers and academics will attend the upcoming ceremonies. Many mech designers would kill to be able to get in touch with some of the leading individuals of our state. As long as you impress them or manage to gain their favor, they can help you in many ways."

"No thanks." Ves instantly declared. "I think my current relations with the Tovar Family are sufficient for the moment. All of you see a lot of promise in me, but to be honest I don't feel I am able to meet all of your expectations right now. I want to go back to my work and endeavor to advance to Journeyman as soon as possible."

"Hmmm... you do have a point." Cordwraith murmured as he rubbed his chin. The shuttle leveled off a bit during its descent to the surface. "I will strike you from the attendance lists, then. Perhaps it is for the best, because you are a very polarizing individual at the moment."

"What do you mean?"

Mr. Cordwraith didn't say anything, but instead activated his comm and entered the galactic net. He browsed to a very popular news portal in the Bright Republic.

The projection depicted a very striking recording of Ves and Venerable Foster standing side-by-side next to the formal data pad of the peace treaty!

MAKE LOVE NOT WAR: HOW A DREAM COUPLE SINGLE-HANDEDLY ENDED THE WAR!

Ves wanted to puke out blood. What kind of nonsense headline did the news portal slander him with! How could they possibly think that he and Venerable Foster were a couple?!

Chapter 1063 A New Beginning

"The war is over! The war is over!"

A week after Ves returned to New Foundation V, political support for the peace treaty grew past a critical threshold. The Bright Senate ratified the peace treaty and the bright president signed it shortly afterwards!

The Vesians also ratified the peace treaty at the same time, thereby marking the formal end of the war.

A cease-fire had already been agreed upon at the time of the peace treaty's unveiling, but only now did it appear that true peace had been achieved!

Ves looked out of the window of his guest quarters at New Foundation V and sighed in relief. As much as he learned so much from his wartime experiences, he did not wish to perpetuate this senseless conflict any longer than it had to. Now that both sides agreed to an early peace, his wartime service had come to an end.

His exemplary performance and his powerful backing put him ahead of the pack. He already received a formal discharge notice from the Mech Corps, releasing him from service today.

"I have Mr. Cordwraith to thank for that." Ves sardonically smiled as he finished his cup of tea.

During his stay on New Foundation V, Ves did not dare to come out of his guest quarters. His face was plastered all over the galactic net because the Bright Republic's news portals all displayed the recordings of Ves and Venerable Foster standing together!

"They promised they would only be recording us together for archival purposes!"

Instead, the news portals outright fabricated a secret love story that transcended state borders. There were so many untruths in what the sleazy journalists claimed that Ves was tempted to sue them for slander.

Unfortunately, the law never tended to favor the victims of slanders in the Bright Republic.

On the surface, it appeared that the news portals possessed a carte blanche to publish any kind of truth they wanted. Since they were in competition against each other, they constantly sought to publish more sensational stories. Was it any kind of surprise that they became accustomed to embellishing the facts?

"There's a thin line between embellishing the facts and distorting the truth. It's far too easy to cross into the latter."

Practically no news portal displayed recordings or images of Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester. Compared to showing off these two old geezers, it was much more attractive to present a young and talented couple who not only earned impressive achievements as demonstrated by their medals, but also lent itself to a sensational forbidden love story!

The cynic in Ves did not believe that the news portals ran with such a stupid story just to attract more viewers.

When Ves studied the news articles, he noticed that all mention of Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester had been scrubbed away. The news portals all seemed to follow a hidden directive that attempted to shape public opinion in a certain direction.

What Ves had a problem with was that the Tovar Family made use of his public image to their own advantage without asking for permission!

With all of his recent publicity, Ves had gained a stellar reputation in the Bright Republic lately. Yet now that the stupid rumors of a hidden romance between a Vesian expert pilot and himself emerged, a lot of people started to develop an intensive dislike of him! The damage to his reputation was incalculable!

When Ves took up this topic to Mr. Cordwraith, the man was not very accommodating.

"Mr. Larkinson, we worked hard to turn you into a war hero." The executive assistant explained as he crossed his arms. "You would have never gotten as much recognition from the Mech Corps if not for Senator Tovar advocating on your behalf. Without his intervention, you would never have received your new Plasma Spark medal for the merit you've earned during your last assignment."

Ves did indeed gain another medal recently after undergoing a mandatory ceremony conducted by Major General Clesse. Receiving the third-highest medal from the Mech Corps neatly complimented his Darkness Eater, but it did not make up for all of the bad press he received.

"My reputation is rather important to me and my business." Ves replied mildly. "The LMC will not be able to fare too well in the Bright Republic if all the pro-war nuts hate my guts."

"Your concerns are noted, but I suggest you adapt to it, Mr. Larkinson. Aren't you already leveraging your military decorations for your own ends? I'm sure you can make use of the extra publicity somehow."

In other words, now that the Tovar Family made use of his reputation, it was up to Ves alone to pick up the pieces.

"I'll deal with it somehow. It isn't the end if a mech designer acquires a mixed reputation."

Plenty of controversial mech designers managed to do brisk business. The extra publicity fueled them, as even bad press called more attention to their products.

"This is a new beginning. I've emerged from the war with far more gains than I expected. I shouldn't quibble over such a trivial issue."

The fast news cycle would soon depress the current stories and replace them with fresh ones to distract the public from their worries. Over time, the public would forget about the false story, though they might still remember his name when they next saw an ad from the LMC.

If there was one enduring benefit that Ves received from all of the publicity, it was that his name recognition was probably the highest among the Apprentice Mech Designers of the Bright Republic! There were probably a lot of Journeymen who were much less known than him at the moment!

A new beginning dawned.

With the war at an end, Ves was about to return to his company. He could make use of his increased public profile to hype up the products of the LMC. In fact, he was already planning to do so once he completed the joint design project with Professor Ventag.

Ves spent his time fruitfully during his week-long hiatus. With the help of the augmented spiritual fragment in his mind, he worked on his draft design and managed to complete it just yesterday.

His draft design depicted an imposing space knight. Based on the parameters of some of NORA Consolidated's best component licenses, he drafted the space knight with an eye towards maximum defensive power. Its super-medium weight class made it larger than regular space knights.

It showed. His attempts to incorporate the large polarizing module into the design of his space knight led to an unfortunate aesthetic design decision. In order to maximize his design's internal volume and keep it relatively balanced and controllable when in flight, Ves opted for the most efficient if not the most visually pleasing option.

"It's fat."

His space knight resembled a sumo wrestler with wings. It looked like an upright flying pig and flew like one as well due to all of its extra mass. Sluggish and unwieldy, his space knight design obviously did not excel in mobility.

Still, Ves regarded his draft design with affection. Its girthy frame made for an iconic sight that always stood out from a crowd of mechs. It exhibited a compelling luster that caught the eye no matter how much people wanted to brush aside.

To Ves, the spiritual quality of his draft design already exceeded every other draft design he composed. Not only did he perceive an increase in spiritual strength, but also an increase in complexity.

Two explanations came to mind when he noticed these differences.

First, his Spirituality probably increased his strength, allowing him to imbue more of it into his designs.

Second, the added flavors blended into the spiritual nature of his draft design carried the imprints of Qilanxo and Venerable Fontain. They mingled with his own imprint for a total of three different influences.

They did not exhibit their influence in equal proportion. As the originator of the design, Ves left the deepest mark. However, Qilanxo's spirituality was so strong that it threatened to overpower Ves' influence.

Among these two major influences, the remnants of Venerable Fontain's spirituality only occupied a minute portion within the space that remained. Its influence was so faint that Ves wouldn't have been able to sense it if he didn't know it was present.

The current pattern was a portend of the final shape of the X-Factor of his finished design. It carried a more complex blend of flavors than before, which reminded Ves of some of the mastercrafted mechs fabricated by renowned experts in their craft.

"Perhaps this is the direction I should develop towards with my design specialty."

He felt he was working towards becoming a magical enchanter who spiritually imbued his mechs with sparks of life derived from astounding existences and living legends.

"Life does not emerge from isolation. A story cannot emerge from nihilism."

Ves already felt his design philosophy churning with excitement at the many insights he came up with recently. He already felt it was worth working on the joint design project for this reason alone.

The more he worked on his space knight, the more he uncovered new possibilities to advance his core specialty!

"Still, it isn't all good."

A specialty granted a mech designer a strong and possibly unique advantage in a single area related to mech design. However, they also locked a mech designer into a fixed direction of designing mechs, making it difficult for them to take another direction.

Ves recognized a major vulnerability with his current direction of advancement. His design philosophy showed its greatest strength when he empowered the X-Factor of his designs with spiritual fragments of other spiritually strong entities.

What happened when he couldn't or didn't want to do that? The X-Factor of his designs would be stunted and weak. They would be no different from the X-Factor of his earliest designs, thereby giving his mech designs only a minute spiritual advantage.

"If I truly decide to go in this direction, I'll have to resign myself to becoming dependent on external sources."

Even so, the benefits outweighed the costs. While his own Spirituality slowly grew in strength, his spiritual imprint did not come with the correct traits to compliment the totem animal and human myth of his Triple Division technique.

Ves could achieve much better results by drawing upon the spiritual fragments of real exobeasts and real human heroes. While obtaining these fragments required him to research his targets and go on a dangerous excursion into the imaginary realm, it was no different from travelling to the frontier in order to hunt for treasures.

From a business perspective, what Ves was doing was to enhance the value of his designs by adding some extra raw materials to his designs. He only needed to do it once to permanently increase the quality of the X-Factor of his designs. This was a lot more generous than designing an expensive mech and having to source the rare exotics each time he wanted to fabricate a copy.

"I'll just have to make sure to do my research properly."

The biggest weakness associated with his specialty that he wouldn't be able to do much if he didn't have access to the right information. Right now, Ves did not lack for resources, as the galactic net contained an almost limitless amount of data for him to trawl through.

If the galactic net didn't provide any suitable material, then he could draw upon his connections to the Clifford Society or his backers to draw upon more obscure information.

Yet what if Ves found himself stranded on a planet without a connection to the galactic net? It happened once during his deployment to the surface of Aeon Corona VII, and it could easily happen again some day.

"I should make preparations for that." He murmured.

He already came up with two possible solutions.

First, he could delegate the information gathering to his company. They could gather information on thousands of notable exobeasts and expert pilots.

Ves could then memorize the details in advance, so that if he fell into a situation where he needed to design a mech quickly, he immediately knew where he needed to go to obtain the right spiritual fragments.

The second solution was to develop another technique. One which went into a different direction than making use of spiritual fragments.

Ves believed his current method wasn't the only way to imbue his mech designs with a strong X-Factor. He already developed some preliminary ideas, but whether they were viable or not remained to be seen.

"It's hard to be at the forefront of a new and unknown field." He sighed.

Chapter 1064 Time of Renewal

After a long time, Ves finally shed himself of his military uniforms and his eye-catching medals and ribbons. He packed all of them deep within his floating luggage trunk and planned to stuff them into his closet the instance he returned home.

Currently, Ves sat in a luxurious waiting area on one of New Foundation's commercial space stations. The space station served as a nexus for transit in and out of the strategic star system.

Few people in the lounge recognized him despite seeing his face plastered all over the news recently. He took a page out of Ketis' playbook and bought an overpriced beret from one of the trendy fashion stores at the space station.

The black beret rested comfortably on his mop of raven hair, though it wasn't the poofy kind which helped Ketis hide her horns.

In order to make himself more incognito, he also copied Melkor and bought a large violet visor that covered half of his upper face. The bright violet color made his visor look gaudy, but it was the largest model the electronics store offered.

For some reason, slim and tiny visors were in vogue these days.

Complemented with a drab casual outfit, Ves looked completely from his sharp and impeccable appearance in the media. Once he donned his accessories, practically no one on the space station gawked at him anymore.

Only one person approached him. When Ves looked up from his seat, he recognized the newcomer's merchant navy uniform.

"Captain Silvestra!"

"Mr. Larkinson, the Barracuda awaits your arrival."

"Good. Let's go."

Ves followed the captain of his corvette out of the lounge and into a series of expansive hallways before they arrived at a pier dedicated to smaller starships. After undergoing several security inspections, they were finally allowed to board the Barracuda.

Shortly after their entry, the Barracuda requested and received permission to separate from the space station and depart. The slim corvette followed a fixed route and slowly sat in line as she waited for her turn to transition out of the New Foundation System from the closest Lagrange point.

After Ves settled in his luggage in his personal stateroom, he entered the bridge and witnessed the proceedings.

Even though several years had gone by, the Barracuda and her assigned crew hardly changed. The interior of the ship may have received some new additions, but it was still essentially the same corvette that Ves received after reaching the finals of the Leemar Open Competition.

The small, all-women crew of the Barracuda looked as fit and attractive as ever. They seemed incredibly familiar with the operation of the ship, which they should after serving on the same ship for years.

Ves sat silently in his observer seat as he witnessed Captain Silvestra calmly dealing with traffic control while at the same time issuing instructions to Miranda Pham, the ship's helmsman.

Only until the ship successfully transitioned into FTL did everyone relax. It was always a hectic moment when they tried to navigate in such a busy part of a busy star system.

"We are now underway to the Rittersberg System, Mr. Larkinson." Captain Silvestra reported.

"Understood. Keep up the good work."

The New Foundation System was very close to the Rittersberg System so the trip would only take a couple of days. Ves figured that since he was already close to the Larkinson Estate, he might as well pay a visit there before he travelled to the Bentheim region.

Ves planned to have a good talk with his grandfather and possibly make some dealings with the family's steering committee. He did not forget that he was an elder of the family by virtue of his business accomplishments.

"How will they treat me now that I've survived and thrived in the war?"

Now that he gained possession of a normal commercial comm, Ves was able to catch up to recent events. He did his best to ignore the stories related to the supposed romance between Venerable Foster and himself and moved on to any news related to the Larkinsons.

A lot of stories popped up. As a famous military family, the Larkinsons attracted a decent amount of attention wherever they showed up. Some of the military veterans of the last war distinguished themselves again during the current generation's war, but they didn't attract as much attention as the rising stars of the family.

Perhaps the most eye-catching Larkinson to stand out from the younger generation was Venerable Ghanso Larkinson.

"So he's a Venerable already?"

He only spent a short time as an expert candidate before he quickly advanced to become the latest expert pilot for the 1st Volari Starhawks! Due to his quick and seemingly effortless advancement, everyone believed that Ghanso had a bright future ahead of him in the Mech Corps!

"Still, he's not the only Larkinson to excel in the war."

Perhaps owing to the shortened duration of the war, none of the other notable Larkinson mech pilots managed to advance to expert pilot. Even so, two more members of the family managed to become expert candidates, giving them hope of catching up to Ghanso Larkinson in time.

The first one that stood out was Porellia Larkinson, the granddaughter of Ovrin Larkinson. Unlike many other Larkinsons, Porellia eschewed more mobile mechs where she could put her excellent mobility training to use and instead opted to specialize in piloting landbound heavy artillery mechs!

Somehow, her operation of these sluggish machines became so good that she somehow reached a superhuman level of performance! All of the engagements she participated in accelerated her development as an expert candidate and it seemed it was only a matter of time before she advanced to expert.

"Good for her."

The other expert candidate in the family was Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, the grandson of Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson.

Ves did not have the best impression of Raymond. The old man never suffered any hardships. As the Third Elder of the family, he managed family's trust fund and other finances.

Fortunately, Tusa managed to escape the fate his grandfather by possessing the right genetic aptitude. He specialized in piloting aerial light skirmishers, which everyone regarded as one of the most dangerous mech types to pilot.

The dangers associated with piloting a flimsily-armored light mech above incredibly hectic battlefields scared most mech pilots away from piloting this mech type. Knowing that some marksman mech could score a lucky hit and send it to the ground meant that only true daredevils possessed the confidence to specialize in these risky but incredibly versatile machines.

Even with the high degree of stimulation, Tusa only managed to become an expert candidate only recently. This suggested to Ves that it might not be certain that his chances of advancing to expert pilot was a lot less optimistic compared to his cousin Porellia.

"Now that the war has ended, Tusa won't be able to stimulate his potential so easily anymore."

That was a shame. Perhaps Tusa might have developed a grudge against Ves seeing as he was being associated with the drafting of the peace treaty.

"Well, it's not like he'll walk up to me and punch me in the face." Ves grinned. "As a careerist, he'll be stuck in the Mech Corps for a long time while I'm back to being a free man."

Naturally, Tusa would still get to enjoy leave and be able to return home in between his deployments. During peacetime, the mech pilots of the Mech Corps never served consecutive tours of duty. Otherwise, how would they have the time to start up their own families?

"My own father shacked up with my mother shortly after the previous generation's war." Ves recalled.

The end of a war meant a new beginning for many people. Many people married and many children were born shortly after each war. It was as if the citizens of the Bright Republic were eager to inject some happiness in their lives so that they could forget the horrors they suffered during the war.

Ves knew for sure that the higher ups like Senator Tovar deliberately fostered such an atmosphere. Under this prevailing mood, the social pressure for unmarried men and women to hook up and start their own families became a major force in the Bright Republic.

"The Vesians are probably the same in that regard."

The Barracuda did not spend too much time in FTL. She emerged from FTL in the sphere of influence of one of the gravitic anchors exerted by one of the four starforts in the capital system.

Ves admired the sight of the nearest starfort while the Barracuda underwent an extensive inspection by the local patrols. The inspectors did their job diligently as if the war hadn't ended yet. Just because hostilities ceased didn't mean that the threat had passed.

"The Vesians might still double-cross us, and the Bentheim Liberation Movement won't take the early peace lying down I think."

The BLM plotted to coordinate an attack on Bentheim with the Mech Legion for such a long time that the sudden cancellation of this major operation must have frustrated them immensely.

Ves knew that the BLM was incredibly persistent in its unrealistic dream to turn the Bentheim System into the heart of an independent state. They would surely pull something off sooner or later, and everyone knew it. Due to all of the security measures within the Rittersberg System, it took an extra day for the Barracuda to reach the orbit of Rittersberg I.

The corvette didn't even receive permission to dock at a space station, land at spaceport on the surface or park herself permanently in orbit. Instead, Ves had no choice but to call for a transit shuttle that brought him from the Barracuda and flew down to the spaceport at Kelnar after some delay.

Once he arrived at the majestic-looking spaceport, he went through more inspections and bureaucratic hurdles before being able to board a shuttle sent by the Larkinsons.

The shuttle brought him from the capital city of Kelnar to the smaller, military-oriented city of Varleton. There, the shuttle landed on the landing pad of the Larkinson Compound.

When Ves stepped out of the shuttle, he breathed the fresh air of the well-regulated planet and became invigorated. "No wonder the Larkinsons make their home in Varleton. It's so peaceful and serene here."

The plentiful greenery and large estates fostered a peaceful environment that was ideal for military veterans to recover from the traumas of the war.

Even Ves felt tempted to spend some months here. Sadly, his business and career obligations prevented him from taking an extended time off. His current design project demanded a lot of design work due to its high complexity.

When Ves stepped into the large, open garden courtyard of the Larkinson Compound, he immediately attracted a lot of attention.

He made for a very odd sight with his beret and visor. Despite his disguise, it didn't take a lot of time for someone to recognize his identity.

"It's Ves Larkinson!"

The younger Larkinson children already dropped their toys and scurried over to Ves. He couldn't help but laugh at the sight. His aunts and uncles watched on from their chairs with understanding smiles.

Even though they hadn't approached him yet, Ves could feel some kinship with the older generation. They lived through the previous generation's war and had been marked by the conflict.

Compared to his last visit, a lot fewer Larkinsons resided in the compound. Many of them returned to active duty due to the recent war. Others just moved out and resided elsewhere.

A young girl tugged at his arm. He recognized Lanie Larkinson from his last visit, though she was a lot shorter and cuter back then. He couldn't help but smile.

"What is it, Lanie?"

"You promised me a mech. When will you give me a mech?"

"Did I?" Ves adopted a confused expression.

"You did! You promised to give me a mech for my birthday!"

"I don't think you're old enough to test your genetic aptitude."

"It doesn't matter! I'll definitely become a mech pilot!" Little Lanie pouted.

The other brats all started begging for mechs as well!

Chapter 1065 Tranquil Courtyard

It took some time for Ves to divest himself of the clingy little brats. Some of their parents came to shoo them away, giving Ves a path to continue up to the main building.

Once he stepped inside, he rid himself of his visor and beret and greeted Ovrin Larkinson, the Fifth Elder of the Larkinson Family.

"It seems that the stories we've heard in the media have a kernel of truth. You have a different air about you, Ves." Ovrin calmly said with his wheezing voice.

Ves recognized the same vibe from Ovrin that he got from other military veterans. "I'm one of you now."

Ovrin shook his head. "You've always been one of us, Ves. Whether you've served in one of the wars or not, you will always be a Larkinson to the rest of the family."

Yeah right. Ves knew very well that the Larkinsons exerted a lot of pressure on the younger generation to serve in the military. Those who didn't volunteer would be left out of the most important circles of the family and plainly received less attention when it came to the allocation of money and benefits.

In any case, Ves was undeniably among the Larkinsons who did their time. Both his awards and his changed demeanor amply proved that he didn't

spend his entire time in service holing up in some quiet research base far away from the frontline.

Admittedly, he did spend half a year in relative safety, but it wasn't as if Ves could mention anything related to Flashlight.

He changed the topic. "Is grandpa Benjamin available?"

"Benjamin will be back in the evening. He's been held up at the Ministry of Defense recently due to the recent demobilization efforts. You've come at a quiet time, Ves. Many Larkinsons are still on their tours of duty. Therefore, don't expect to meet many family members during your stay."

"I understand. I only came to have a talk with my grandfather before I go back to Cloudy Curtain."

He spent the rest of the afternoon in the Larkinson Compound sitting with the aunts and uncles at the front courtyard. He felt as if he became an old man as his family members leisurely gossiped and talked about all kinds of trivial topics.

Surprisingly, they didn't express much curiosity about Ves at all. To the old dogs, Ves had earned the right to sit among them, that was all. Everyone had their own war stories, but it was up to them to take the initiative to tell them to each other.

Not everyone wanted to tell their war stories. Some of them didn't want to relive those moments. Ves had the feeling that many of them just didn't want to brag or attract any special attention.

As for a small number of Larkinsons like himself, the classified nature of their missions prevented them from disseminating any details about their most important experiences.

The other Larkinsons could tell that Ves was under this restriction, and they suitably took note of that in their subsequent behavior.

It felt good to Ves to be among family. While he wasn't particularly close to any of them, their shared blood gave them a strong bond that tied them all together in a way that nothing else could.

This was true kinship!

The Larkinsons at the compound didn't do much besides keeping each other company. Yet, they nonetheless helped each other heal and find peace in this tranquil environment due to their mutual understanding.

Time flew by and before he knew it, Benjamin Larkinson returned from the Ministry of Defense. He immediately called up Ves once he heard that his grandson arrived at the compound.

Inside Benjamin's main office inside the compound, the first thing his grandfather did was to hug his grandson. "Ves! I'm very glad to see you whole and healthy! When I heard that you've almost died to an assassination attempt, I was almost ready to turn MinDef upside down!"

Ves was touched by his grandfather's concern. "It was just a flesh wound."

They both laughed at that joke.

"I'm glad you haven't lost your sense of levity. That's a good sign."

After they finished hugging, they took their seats and began to discuss some business.

Benjamin Larkinson started with the elephant in the room. "Lately, the Larkinson Estate has received an increasing amount of scrutiny. After some investigation, I've learned that we have attracted the attention of some very powerful political influences. When we followed up on that, we learned that

their recent actions are somehow tied to you, Ves. What have you been doing lately?"

"I can't say much, grandfather, but I've done some favors for the Tovar Family and they have given me some favors in return. At some point, I've fallen into their camp."

Grandpa Benjamin adopted a grave expression. "That's dangerous. Very dangerous. I never explained to you about the dangers of associating yourself with the founding families. I didn't think you would get in touch with the apex influences of the Bright Republic so soon."

Ves shrugged. "It's already done. It's hard to get rid of their clutches once they saw value in me. Do you think I can say no to someone like Senator Tovar? Also, I've learnt that a growing company like the LMC will eventually have to depend on political backing in order to avoid being taken advantage of by the government. For better or worse, I'm aligned with the Tovars now."

"Thereby dragging the rest of the family with you into their camp."

"I don't think that's the case." Ves shook his head. "The Tovars don't seem to be holding any expectations towards the rest of the family. It's only me and my business that he's interested in. Surely their political rivals won't go after the rest of Larkinsons, will they?"

The sour mood emanating from Benjamin already told Ves that this was a vain hope.

"A lot of family members aren't pleased by your unilateral actions. Whatever the circumstances, this is the first time in the four-hundred year history of our family that we have strayed from our neutrality. I don't think I need to explain to you why we value our lack of involvement in the political scene."

Ves nodded. He already reasoned that out on his own. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I can formally separate myself from the family if that is what it takes

to draw a line between us. I can be like Raella who isn't formally connected to the Larkinson Family anymore."

Benjamin immediately shook his head. "That won't work. Raella is... a deviant, but she is nothing different from the other Larkinsons who went their own way. You on the other hand are not just a Larkinson, but the first successful mech designer to ever emerge from our midst. The massive sums of money your Living Mech Corporations has earned us in dividends has prompted us to reconsider our recent... stance."

"Stance on what?"

"On whether we should stick to tradition or adjust to our new circumstances."

"And what have you all decided?"

"The steering committee, at least those who aren't fighting in the frontlines, came together a month ago and decided to double down on our association with your company."

"I thought I told you I like my company to be hands-off from the family."

"You know how some of us think. You're a Larkinson, so why shouldn't you share some of your fortune with the rest of the family? Look, I know it looks bad to you. You must think that we're being pushy in order to leech off your success."

"That sounds about right."

"Yet aren't you benefiting from the family as well, Ves? Not only did we help bring you up, but we can also provide you with continuous assistance. While we are nothing like the Tovar Family, we have our own connections to depend upon. In particular, we possess very strong connections to the Mech Corps which can be very useful to a mech designer like you. In addition, we have

many highly-trained mech pilots in the family who would love the opportunity to settle down on a quiet planet like Cloudy Curtain."

Ves felt as if Benjamin wouldn't relent on this issue. "Why is the family so insistent on hooking their tentacles in my company? Is it about the money?"

"What other reason is there?" Benjamin sighed. "None of the businesses we operate are anywhere close to your mech company. In fact, many of our elders feel ashamed. It only took you a handful of years to grow your company to a point where it is earning billions of credits a year. Meanwhile, it took four centuries for multiple generations of Larkinsons to accumulate enough assets that only earns us around fifty to sixty million credits a year."

The Larkinsons weren't savvy investors or businessmen. It didn't help that they invested most of their surplus earnings into acquiring more real estate on Rittersberg. Property on the capital planet was notoriously expensive, and while they guaranteed a steady profit, the ongoing expenses due to high property taxes and other fees meant that the Larkinson Estate could forget about achieving any high returns on their investment.

Considering the relatively paltry amount of profit they earned from their stable and unexciting asset portfolio, suddenly obtaining a twenty-five percent stake in a fast-growing mech company must seem like an enormous shock to the Larkinsons!

With access to more money than they ever handled at any single time, the Larkinsons found that they could use that money in many useful areas. They became so overcome with greed that they even forgave Ves for dragging them closer to the Tovar Family!

"So what is it that you are demanding from me, exactly?" Ves frowned. "Isn't it enough for the family to enjoy its twenty-five percent stake in my company?"

"It is because we own twenty-five percent of your company that we don't feel entirely assured to leave you in charge of your company by itself. You have done an amazing job so far, but you are still young and capable of making mistakes. Having some of our old hands help you out will do a lot to reassure the family of the continuity of your company."

"I don't need any help."

"We insist."

Ves and Benjamin stared at each other in a brief period of silence. Even though Benjamin was a former expert pilot who earned a lot of distinctions back in the day, Ves was no longer a defenseless young lamb.

Eventually, Benjamin snorted. "You've learned how to stand up for yourself."

"Compared to the likes of Senator Tovar, you're not scary at all."

Now that it appeared that Ves wouldn't budge, his grandfather took a step back. "Okay then. I'll tell the family to rein themselves in, alright? However, you should throw the family a bone. Since you're so touchy about retaining control over the company, we won't insist on sending additional managers to your company."

"Good." Ves smiled. "I'm glad you gave up on this issue."

"Not so fast, Ves. I strongly advise you to accept our mech pilots. The Mech Nursery has continually expanded its production capacity and it has become an incredibly vulnerable manufacturing complex. You will need all the help you can get and if word leaks out that genuine Larkinson mech pilots are guarding your facility, you can scare away a lot of greedy opportunists."

While Ves didn't have any exact numbers, if the LCM's Mech Nursery hosted more than a dozen production lines, then his grandfather indeed have a good point. With tens of billions worth of production equipment churning out mechs

en masse, it would be an absolute catastrophe if someone launched an attack on the Mech Nursery.

Ves looked intrigued. He was a lot more open to this suggestion. Larkinson mech pilots enjoyed a great reputation due to their solid training. Even if they weren't as amazing as Ghanso or Porellia, they still stood head and shoulders above practically any other mech pilot.

"Which Larkinsons are you planning to bolster my forces?"

Chapter 1066 Three Little Chicks

As much as Ves wanted to resist the influence of the Larkinsons, there was some merit to entrusting responsibility to family. In any case, he did not plan to introduce too many family members within his sphere of influence at once.

Family could be useful. The Larkinsons generally enjoyed a good reputation. They were famous for their upright conduct and their excellent skill in piloting mechs. How could Ves not be attracted to such strength? They were certainly more reliable than random mercenaries who signed ten-year contracts but could easily forget about it when a battle took a bad turn.

Thus, Ves came around to hosting more Larkinson mech pilots. The only concern he had about accepting the help of more family members was that he did not wish to lose control over his own outfit!

If he paid for the mechs, training, salaries and other ongoing expenses of the Avatars of Myth, then he damn well sure called the shots!

Grandpa Benjamin suggested the names of various old dogs, but Ves rejected them all.

"If an old Larkinson veteran takes charge in my Avatars of Myth, where does that leave Melkor?" Ves shook his head. "He's much younger and inexperienced than most of the old dogs of the Larkinson family."

His grandfather smiled at Ves. "No offense to Melkor, but he doesn't possess any actual leadership experience. If you want to make your Avatars of Myth truly shine, then you should put a more capable leader in charge. Many of our retired Larkinson mech pilots have reached the rank of mech captain when they served in the Mech Corps. We even have a couple who have managed to reach the rank of mech major! All of the names I just put forward will certainly do a better job in leading your personal force!"

"No thank you."

Ves liked Melkor even if he didn't trust the dropout from the Mech Corps very much. In any case, his relative youth and inexperience turned him into a pliable figurehead to Ves. Melkor possessed enough administrative capabilities to run the Avatars of Myth but lacked the charisma and experience to be a strong leader who could subvert the loyalties of the mech pilots!

On the other hand, an experienced leader of Major Verle's caliber would be much more difficult to control. Ves would constantly be worrying if the Avatars of Myth would still follow his orders when times got tough.

Eventually, Ves agreed to receive a first batch of three younger mech pilots. All of them graduated from the mech academies only recently and hadn't been able to enlist in the Mech Corps before the war had already ended.

"The three Larkinsons I'm putting under your care are a rather unfortunate lot." Benjamin shook his head in pity. "They've trained so hard in order for them to excel in the war, but they will have to wait at least a generation before they can showcase their prowess against the Vesians. Please do them a favor and take them on. Perhaps they will be able to learn there is more to piloting mechs than fighting against the Vesians."

Once they agreed on this topic, they moved on to discuss some other minor matters. For example, the increased prominence of the LMC within the family increased Ves' stature among the Larkinsons.

Although the Larkinsons didn't went as far as to make Ves their new patriarch, it was undeniable that he was more than just an elder of the family. As long as Ves continued to bring in the money, his influence within the family was just as great as an expert pilot!

"Our Larkinson expert pilots continue to earn renown for our family, but they aren't exactly capable of leveraging their abilities into money." Benjamin sighed. "You're different in that regard. It's not shameful for a mech designer to be a profiteer."

Having a higher say in the family meant that he wielded more power in the steering committee, not that Ves particularly paid attention to that. In any case, this was just the start to Ves. Once he advanced to Journeyman and his LMC grew even further, he would quickly become more prominent than all the Larkinson expert pilots put together!

"There is one more topic I wanted to address before you go, Ves. It's about your father."

Ves suddenly turned stony-eyed. "Did you obtain any news from the Nyxian Gap?"

"It's difficult to obtain reliable information from that pirate-infested region. We've managed to find traces of your father throughout the Nyxian Gap, but at some point a year ago he dropped off the face of the galaxy. For what it's worth, we haven't found any signs that someone killed or kidnapped him. We think that he has changed his face and adopted another identity to throw off pursuit. Since the investigators we've hired haven't managed to find a clue of his current whereabouts, it's safe to say it's working."

Anything could be behind the disappearance of his father. While Ves wanted to believe that his grandfather was right in that his father merely reconstructed his face and took on another name, he couldn't help but be afraid that something drastic happened.

Unfortunately, Ves was in no position to help his father out. In fact, he would just be implicating himself if he blundered into the Nyxian Gap without the right preparations. He needed to grow much more powerful in order to track his father down and provide meaningful assistance.

For now, it was best that they remained separate. Ves never felt the urge to advance faster than this moment! If he wanted to take his first step towards greater prominence, then he needed to advance to Journeyman as fast as possible!

After his long and fruitful discussion with Benjamin, Ves felt he understood his grandfather and the Larkinson Family a bit more. He also learned that the role the LMC played in boosting the family's financial fortunes was a lot more influential than he initially thought.

If his grandfather told him the truth, then the Larkinson Family was even ready to move away from their insistence on sticking to their principle of neutrality!

As Ves boarded a shuttle and departed from the Larkinson Compound, he considered whether that was a good development. For some reason, he felt as if his existence was corrupting the Larkinsons.

"No tradition lasts forever. Even families change." Ves muttered.

Once the shuttle arrived at the spaceport at Kelnar, Ves moved on to a transit shuttle that brought him up at a space station in orbit. There, he transferred to yet another shuttle that finally brought him back to the Barracuda, which was parked a distance away from Rittersberg I.

Along the way, Ves picked up the three young Larkinson mech pilots. He welcomed them onto his personal space yacht. For the moment, the mech pilots appeared dazzled by the extravagant wealth implied by his ownership of such a fine little starship.

"How much does the Barracuda cost?"

"Around a billion cols when I first got it. It's a competition prize. I didn't pay for it myself." Ves nonchalantly shrugged.

The eyes of Chette, Jannzi and Rhode all widened at the mention of such an immense sum! A billion cols was a billion coalition credits!

This basically meant that the Barracuda was worth at least 100 billion bright credits at her peak value!

Of course, several years of regular operation depreciated her value by at least half. In addition, there wouldn't be many second-hand buyers who would actually fork over 50 billion credits for a little private yacht.

Nobody in their right minds would pay so much money for a single ship, at least not in the Bright Republic. Ves would have to go to the Friday Coalition and find some profligate spender to liquidate the Barracuda.

Still, Ves deliberately impressed the value of his personal yacht upon the three young Larkinsons in order to draw a line between himself and them. They were sorely mistaken if they thought they could take liberties just because they shared the same family name.

Ves was in charge, and he wanted every Larkinson who followed him to learn this lesson.

As the Barracuda transitioned into FTL and headed straight towards Bentheim, Ves found out he went a little overboard. The freshly-graduated trio of mech pilots were a lot younger and less experienced than he thought.

After everyone settled into their own cabins, Ves invited the three Larkinsons put under his care for a drink at the lounge. The three young Larkinsons meekly sat beside each other as they faced Ves, who possessed a presence that only older Larkinsons emanated.

It helped that Ves secretly pressured them with his Spirituality. He wanted to influence the new Larkinsons right away. He did not want another Raella on his hands who abandoned her duties in favor of going her own way.

"So." Ves began as he calmly took a sip of his glass of wine. "Introduce yourselves, please. I don't think I've seen your faces very often during our annual family gatherings. Please begin with your name and mech pilot specialty."

"Chette Larkinson, spaceborn rifleman mech specialist."

"Jannzi Larkinson, space knight specialist."

"Rhode Larkinson, landbound striker specialist."

Ves lit up at the mention of the second name. Jannzi Larkinson just so happened to be specialized in piloting space knights! He could make use of her to refine his upcoming super-medium space knight design!

Of course, now was not the time to overwhelm his younger cousins with his work. He maintained his boss-like demeanor and calmly explored their history. All of them received vigorous training from the Larkinsons on top of attending renowned mech academies. In fact, they just graduated from a top mech academy in Rittersberg and waited at home for the next round of enlistments that was scheduled to commence in a couple of months.

"The war ended before we got the opportunity to enlist." Chette Larkinson sighed.

The other two Larkinsons sent Ves a questioning glance. They couldn't help but recall the recent news.

Ves instantly knew what they were thinking about. A dangerous aura emanated from his body. "Don't believe in the news. It's all slander and propaganda. There's no way I hooked up with a Vesian expert pilot. Anyone who utters a word about that stupid lie will be booted right back to Rittersberg, is that clear?"

The three young Larkinsons nodded their heads like hungry chicks.

As they got to know each other a little better, Ves became more confident that he could keep them under his thumb. Perhaps his grandfather knew of his concerns and deliberately put forward young and inexperienced recruits to put him at ease.

In any case, Ves easily accepted the presence of Chette, Jannzi and Rhode Larkinson under his care. All three of them were destined to join the Avatars of Myth and follow orders from Melkor.

Rhode Larkinson would be supplementing the existing landbound mech company of the Avatars of Myth. Since he specialized in piloting a landbound striker mech, he would have to make due with a commercial mech bought from the market.

Striker mechs didn't sell as well as the other mech types, so Ves wouldn't design such a mech anytime soon.

As for Chette and Jannzi, they both professed a desire to pilot spaceborn mechs. It would be a waste to keep them bound to the land. Ves planned to brush off his long-dormant plans of setting up a spaceborn contingent of the Avatars of Myth.

With an adequate amount of protection on land and in space, the Avatars of Myth should be able to provide comprehensive protection to both himself and his company.

The Barracuda made swift progress in reaching Bentheim. It was always easier to travel to a port system. The Barracuda didn't travel in-system but instead lingered at the edge of the star system long enough to jump to Cloudy Curtain.

After more than a week of travel, the Barracuda comfortably arrived at the Cloudy Curtain System and reached the orbit of its only inhabited planet.

The corvette descended into the atmosphere and landed straight onto a purpose-built landing pad next to the Mech Nursery. Ves was surprised that Captain Silvestra opted to go straight home without bothering to stop by at the spaceport at Orinoco!

"We've received an exemption." The captain of the Barracuda grinned. "There's so much goods flowing in and out of the Mech Nursery that it's a huge bother to go through the spaceport. After applying some pressure on the local government, the LMC received a pass on inspections."

It seemed that the influence of the LMC on Cloudy Curtain grew so large that the local government had no choice but to bend its own rules!

Chapter 1067 Massive Sums

"Home sweet home." Ves muttered as he looked out the expansive windows of the penthouse office of the LMC's headquarters.

He missed the omnipresent grey clouds with its rainbow color shine. How many times did he dream about returning home? It felt so good for him to be back in the saddle.

Below the ground, the Mech Nursery churned out mechs after mechs on a daily basis. The LMC employed thousands of employees, all working to satisfy the market demands for the company's two iconic mech models.

When the Barracuda landed at the manufacturing complex, Ves arranged for someone to settle Chette, Jannzi and Rhode Larkinson. At the same time, Ves called up all of his core confidants to his penthouse office in order to get up to speed to the current state of the LMC.

As Ves turned around, he turned his gaze to a set of couches where his key subordinates waited for their boss to get down to business.

Calsie Doornbos looked relieved now that Ves returned to helm the company. While she managed to hold down the fort in the founder's absence, the responsibility of operating such a huge company was not for the light-hearted. It was admirable that she managed to hold out for so long without running the LMC into the ground!

As a publicist and marketing manager, Gavin Neumann did not hold a high position within the hierarchy of the company. Nevertheless, the man was adaptable and possessed a sober perspective with regards to mechs. The young man was ready to work as Ves' executive assistant at any time.

Melkor Larkinson hadn't escaped the war entirely untouched. Ves already heard that several skirmishes and attacks took place on Cloudy Curtain, but his cousin did an admirable job in repelling those opportunistic attacks. Not only that, but Melkor also managed to learn on the job as he led the Avatars of Myth. Ves saw echoes of Captain Byrd and Major Verle in his cousin's demeanor.

The only odd person out of this intimate gathering was Ketis. Wearing iconic poofy black beret, the pirate designer barely seemed to have reigned in her dangerous vibe. Ves wanted to palm his face when he saw her. Even though

she wore modern trendy clothes, the giant scabbarded greatsword floating behind the couch made it clear that she was barely civilized!

Held within her arms, Lucky purred as the daughter of the frontier stroked his bony plated surface. His exterior looked a little darker and more metallic since the last time Ves spotted Lucky back at the military hospital on Bentheim.

In any case, Ves confirmed that Lucky still carried his personal comm on his collar.

"Lucky, come here, boy."

The mechanical cat didn't obey the words of his owner. Instead, he continued to squint his eyes and purr as Ketis kept stroking his back!

Ves exasperatingly sighed and walked all the way towards the couch and made a grab for Lucky's collar. With a quick snap of his finger, he detached his personal comm from his cat.

"Meow!"

Lucky woke up from his petting session and hissed at the thief who snatched his collar!

"What are you so touchy about?" Ves snorted at his pet while he snapped his comm around his wrist. "This comm is mine in the first place. You were just a convenient holder to hang up my comm during my military service. Now that I've been discharged from the Mech Corps, my comm can finally return to its rightful owner!"

"Meow meow!"

Ves ignored the yowls from his indignant pet and took a seat on one of the couches. He idly stroked the thin band of his comm like Ketis stroked Lucky's back. As far as he was concerned, his reunion with his personal comm and the System it held within was long overdue.

He couldn't wait to activate the System for the first time in years. Still, he thought it best if he addressed more immediate business first. Right now, he wanted to know where the LMC currently stood!

"Okay, Calsie. Tell me the basics. How many mechs did we sell and how much profit did we earn?"

The former temporary CEO of the company knew the key figures of the LMC by heart. "The LMC grew rapidly in the three years since you've been gone. The board of directors pushed for a rapid expansion in production capacity in order to maximize the sales of our silver label mechs. Right now, the manufacturing floor of the Mech Nursery is host to one Dortmund production line, five Benson production lines and eleven Hanover production lines!"

Ves frowned at that. That was a lot less production lines than he expected, yet he wasn't familiar with the Hanover line of production equipment. As far as he knew, a complete Benson production line cost around 3 billion credits, and the LMC acquired five of them in total for a total worth of 15 billion credits!

That was already a huge investment, so the mention of eleven new Hanover production lines gave a sense of foreboding in him. There must be a reason why the LMC stopped making use of the perfectly serviceable Benson production lines.

"How much does a Hanover production line cost?"

Calsie seemed hesitant for a moment. Eventually, she bit the bullet. "Around 8 billion bright credits for each complete production line."

"What?! 8 billion credits!?" Ves thundered. "Why in the hell would you pay almost three times for a Hanover compared to a perfectly serviceable Benson?"

"We used to host more Benson production lines, but we've sold them back in order to ease our acquisition of the Hanover production lines. Compared to

the Bensons, the Hanovers are much more geared towards mass production. They work faster and more precise. They produce less errors because they feature a higher degree of automation. This means they are more efficient and produce less waste, which improved our profit margin over time."

All of those arguments sounded logical to Ves, but the upfront cost of those production lines were ruinous! How could the LMC be thinking of acquiring luxurious production equipment when it only offered two products in its mech catalog?

Ves wanted to saw open the heads of those idiotic directions who wanted to pursue growth above all else and see how much of it consisted of greed.

"Okay then." Ves sighed. "So we have sixteen production lines in total. How many mechs are we producing per month?"

"Right now, we are manufacturing at capacity, which roughly means we are shipping around a 150 mechs a month. Recent publicity has given our sales a strong boost, so every production line is practically around the clock. In fact, we can pump out mechs at a faster rate. The reason why we are only producing this much is because our production equipment require regular maintenance. We are also obliged to fabricate spare parts, which take up a small amount of production capacity as well. Furthermore, while we've expanded our testing ground, it still takes time for our test pilots to put our freshly-fabricated mechs to their paces."

That sounded reasonable to Ves. This meant that every production line pumped out almost ten mechs a month on average.

"Okay then. Let's move on to money. How much operating income did the company make during my three years of absence and what's the current financial state of the company?"

Calsie smiled. "Mind you, while we are now sitting on top of sixteen production lines, it took time for us to acquire the funding and means to expand. During our gradual expansion, we've sold around 3500 silver label mechs. Our product margins from those sales has fluctuated over the years due to inflation and the rising cost of raw materials, but we've managed to make a profit of 26 billion credits from selling so many mechs."

"26 billion credits!"

"That's not the extent of our profits. As our Blackbeak and Crystal Lord models proved to be a sleeping success, other mech companies began to grow envious at the profit margins we've achieved. Upon your instructions, we refused to offer any accommodations with regards to the licensing contracts. Even so, seven mech companies still decided to license the Blackbeak design while twelve mech companies licensed the more expensive Crystal Lord design."

Ves abruptly shot his back a little straighter. "The MTA put a high valuation on the licenses of my two designs."

"Every mech company who licensed the LMC's mech designs paid full price." Calsie grinned. "That means the Blackbeak design netted you 21 billion credits in licensing fees while the Crystal Lord design granted us a whopping 60 billion credits! Even though the MTA took a ten percent cut, that still means we've earned more than 72 billion credits just from licensing your designs!"

72 billion credits! Ves was practically over the moon when he heard that sum. Ves never expected that his earnings from licensing out his designs would dwarf the profits the LMC accumulated over three years!

"Those licensing contracts also came with per-unit licensing fees, right?"

"Right." Calsie nodded. "Every mech company who produces a copy of a licensed design or a variant of it is obligated to pay us a fee. For example, the

bronze label Blackbeaks nets us 1.5 million credits in royalties per copy. Best of all, the mech companies pay this fee at the moment the mech rolls off the production line, so we don't have to wait for the mech to be sold to receive our cut. In total, we've earned around 12 billion credits from royalties on your mech designs alone!"

This profit structure showed why design studios existed. As long as they gathered a bunch of capable mech designers together, they could pump out a large number of designs and variants a year. As long as some of them got licensed, they stood to earn billion of credits without lifting a single finger!

While the design studios merrily focused on designing mechs, other mech companies needed to toil over the production and marketing of their licensed designs! It was an incredibly lazy business model that attracted many mech designers who didn't want to bother with the production aspect of their profession.

Still, even if he could earn a lot of easy money by pumping out designs all day, Ves believed it was better to take charge of his own production. Many high-ranked mech designers started their own companies and engaged in production for a reason. Working at a design studio tended to make the mech designers who worked there become out of touch with the practical side of mech design.

In total, the LMC earned well over 100 billion credits in operating income! Yet this sum did not cover all expenses. It left out the cost of overhead as well as other expenses such as taxes and interest payments on the big pile of debt the company took on to afford the fancy new Hanover production lines.

With good news comes the bad. Ves couldn't avoid the issue any longer. "Talk to me about our debt and other expenses."

Some of the money they earned got gobbled up by the overhead. Just the salaries for thousands of employees bled the company of hundreds of millions of credits a month.

The cost of maintenance, security, depreciation and so on took out a substantial bite out of their operating income. The money they spent on paying taxes, some of which were deductible and some of which were not, drained the company of several billion credits annually.

On top of that, the company forked out a generous amount of dividend payments to its shareholders at the same time!

While Calsie didn't get into the nitty gritty details, she didn't mince her words when it came to the LMC's current debt obligations. "Times have been rather difficult as the war went on. Many of the mech companies which licensed our mechs eventually went bankrupt or moved on to mech models as their profits dried up due to the worsening market conditions. The worsening sentiment affected our company as well. If not for your recent publicity which allowed us to run all of our production lines at capacity, we were only barely keeping our heads above the water."

In total, the LMC accumulated 54 billion credits in debt. The interest rates of those loans varied a bit, but it still amounted to several billion credits per year!

Ves frowned at the sums. "Don't you think the banks are ripping us off?"

"There is a limit to what the banks and financial institutions are willing to agree to." Calsie shook her head. "With so many mech companies struggling for cash, demand has outpaced supply. We haven't been able to obtain more favorable rates."

While Ves looked very severe, inwardly he sighed in relief. He expected worse. While owing 54 billion credits was not something he could casually

brush off, Ves still found it to be a manageable sum considering how much money the LMC raked in just from relying on two of his aging mech designs.

Now that Ves was back in charge, the LMC would quickly be able to resume its growth in time!

Chapter 1068 Queued Announcements

Currently, the LMC enjoyed a resurgence in sales. Helped by Ves' appearances in the news, Marcella Bollinger and the LMC's marketing department invested in multiple marketing campaigns in order to take advantage of the situation!

Although the marketing campaigns cost the LMC billions of credits, the investment was clearly worth it as the company gained substantial uptick in orders for its coveted silver label mechs!

"The LMC is sitting on a cash pile of 4 billion credits and growing." Calsie remarked. "Even without your intervention, we'll still be able to sustain the company for at least a year even if the spike in sales has passed."

Ves nodded in understanding. "You did a good job keeping the company afloat. While I'm resuming my position at the top of the company, I won't push you aside. I have a different job in mind for you, though I think you deserve a much-needed vacation for now."

"Thank you, Ves. I truly need a break. Running a mech company day-by-day is incredibly hectic. I don't know how you can deal with the criticism and doubts all day."

"That's easy. Just ignore them. Why should I pay any attention to the opinions of random bystanders? The only criteria that truly matters is how many mechs we're able to sell, and from what I see, you didn't do too badly in that area."

After he finished with Calsie, he moved on to Gavin. They didn't talk a lot. Ves merely wanted to know where the LMC stood in terms of brand recognition and reputation.

"It's kind of a mixed bag." Gavin shrugged. "Our brand is definitely a lot more famous than before, but it's still an obscure mech company to the public. Even if you've shown up a lot in the news lately, there's a limit to how much we can leverage that into boosting our brand. A lot of other mech companies are still pumping out new designs, and those are the biggest attention grabbers in the market."

Ves got the message. As much as the LMC became more prominent during his absence, the market would still think little of it unless it stopped resting on its laurels and expanded its mech catalog with new and exciting mech models.

"What about my own reputation?"

"Yeah.. uhh.. About that.." Gavin hesitated.

"I told you already, it's all lies!" Ketis suddenly shrieked, causing Lucky who rested on her lap to jump in the air in fright! "There's no way that Ves has fallen in love with that witch, right?!"

Not this again. Ves couldn't believe he needed to address this topic in front of his confidants. "Ketis is right. You people should know better than to believe the lies circulating in the news. I am not in love with a Vesian nor did I become a sympathizer for the enemy. Please drop this topic."

When Ves turned to Melkor, his cousin didn't have much more to add than what he already said during the previous hospital visit.

"The Avatars of Myth are well-trained and well-equipped." Melkor said with a slight tinge of pride, though his face-obscuring visor made it hard for Ves to read his expression. "We are able to field up to forty mechs at a time, all of which are at least midrange or premium quality. This is a very powerful

fighting force and it has served us well in deterring many casual raids on the Mech Nursery."

"Yet you sound disappointed."

"You just heard Calsie state that the Mech Nursery is home to more than 100 billion credits worth of production equipment." Melkor mildly shrugged. "That's an astronomical amount of money we're talking about, and it's all concentrated in a single place. Many people are greedily eyeing our expensive production equipment."

"I agree that we need to expand the Avatars of Myth. We can't keep depending on Sanyal-Ablin Security Services to cover the bulk of our protection. Right now is not the best time to expand, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't plan ahead. Please draft a plan to expand the roster of Avatars of Myth with a full spaceborn mech company. I think we can put the light carriers that we've obtained to good use with the addition of a spaceborn mech contingent."

This was welcome news to Melkor. "I've already drafted a suitable plan. It's not like I had anything else to spend my time on all these years."

"Good. Send it to my comm account. I'll look over it later."

Once he finished discussing about the Avatars of Myth, Ves finally turned to Ketis. "So how are you enjoying Cloudy Curtain?"

"Boring." Ketis replied flatly. She seemed a lot more irritable than before now that Lucky jumped from her lap and leisurely floated above their heads.

"There's nothing to do in this dirtball of a planet. Even though I did as you suggested and tried my hand at designing some variants for practice, I feel like I can't work very well without direction."

That was a common deficiency among mech designers who had been raised too closely by their mentors and teachers. Ves frowned as he considered this

problem. Ketis needed to learn to be more independent, but how could he instill this quality in her by taking charge over her again?

"I'll give you something to do after I settle back into the company, Ketis." Ves promised. "In fact, I'm currently working on an exciting new design project with someone else. Right now, I'm not cleared to discuss the details with you, but I'll be sure to give you an opportunity to contribute on my upcoming design."

Everyone except Melkor looked excited when Ves mentioned that he was already working on another mech design. What did the LMC need the most right now? A new design!

As a mech designer herself, Ketis knew the best out of all of them how good Ves was at designing mechs. She already looked forward to participating in his design project, especially if it involved a sword-wielding mech!

The four of them discussed some other matters but Ves was starting to grow impatient. Now that he heard the essentials, the rest could wait. The hand stroking the thin band of his comm grew more and more insistent as if he couldn't wait to activate it again.

Eventually, he couldn't take it longer. He coughed. "Please, it's been a long day and I've only just returned. Let's adjourn our meeting for the day and come back tomorrow, is that okay?"

After Ves said goodbye to his confidants and packed them out of his office, he walked over to the imposing desk and seated himself on the formidable chair behind it. Only now did he feel as if he truly resumed his old position.

"This is my seat of power." Ves declared as he ran his palm over the surface of his desk.

The entire interior of his huge office with its high ceilings and large empty spaces had been designed to be as imposing and impressive as possible.

He previously thought he overdid it on the theatrics, but now he felt he truly fit in his own office. No matter how you looked at it, a company that sold thousands of mechs a year could never be led by an average person!

"I'm becoming more and more exceptional by the day. The times where I have to quibble over a couple of thousands credits is long gone. Even earning a billion credits is as easy as waving my hand at this point."

All in all, Ves entered the big leagues now. As the lead designer of such a major company, he no longer felt as if he put too much attention on the exact sums the company handled each fiscal quarter.

"A mech designer should mainly concern themselves with designing mechs. Obsessing over money is only needed when money is hard to come by. Those days are long over for me at this point."

Novices and Apprentices routinely struggled over every single credit they could get their hands on. As for Ves, even if he threw a billion credits on the streets, he wouldn't cry too much over its loss.

"I've grown so much, but it's time to put that into high gear."

After three years of abstinence, Ves was finally reunited with the source of his success. No matter how much he wanted to pretend that it was his own hard work that carried him this far, the plain truth was that an average mech designer would have never enjoyed such a wild success!

"It's time."

Ves activated his comm. The device lit up and a projected interface popped up. All of it looked standard, and Ves remembered that he customized its interface to camouflage the exceptional software program held within.

He flexed his hand while issuing a diagnostics command to his comm. It quickly reported back that all of its functions worked normally and that the comm didn't degrade even a tiny bit.

Having upgraded his personal comm at least once, Ves expected nothing less from this remarkable comm. Aside from the secret buried deep within, the hardware itself was exceptional as well.

While he was tempted to proceed with the next step, he halted his fingers and looked around. The huge space and the large windows set behind his desk did not make him feel secure. Even if Lucky possessed the capability to squish every spy bug in the chamber, Ves did not feel completely reassured he could handle his deepest secret in such an exposed location.

"Come on, Lucky. Let's take a trip down to my personal lab." He said as he rose up from his seat.

The Mech Nursery encompassed both the headquarters and the principal manufacturing facilities of the Living Mech Corporation. With Lucky materializing on his shoulders, Ves took a number of elevators reserved for his own use and travelled all the way underground to his personal lab and workshop floor.

Nothing except Lucky and some cleaning bots entered this floor in the past three years. When Ves entered his most important sanctuary on Cloudy Curtain, he breathed in the clean sterile air and beheld the various lab and workshop equipment that had remained unused for so long.

He frowned a bit. "I should get around to upgrading my lab. Most of this stuff is too cheap or inadequate to keep up with my current capabilities."

Today was not the day for him to resume his work on his current design project.

No, today was the day he reunited with the System.

Ves and Lucky entered a small, enclosed room that had been designed like a vault.

With meters of thick armor all around him, Ves felt pretty confident that not even the best spy bugs could listen in from afar. As for any spy bugs that had the temerity to sneak into this small space, they didn't stand a chance against Lucky and the Privacy Shield.

When Ves called up his comm interface once again, he first activated his Privacy Shield, and then activated the long-dormant Mech Designer System.

A pause ensued.

[Welcome to the Mech Designer System. Please design your new mech.]

A familiar message greeted Ves.

[Deep scan complete. Current user detected. Welcome back, Ves Larkinson.]

"It's good to see you too, System." Ves smiled.

Another short pause ensued.

Then, his comm flooded him with a deluge of messages!

[Design Evaluation: New Sentinel...]

[You have received 1000 Design Points for completing an original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 100 Design Points for designing a mech with a trace of X-Factor.]

[Design Evaluation: Leiner Grey...]

[You have received no Design Points for completing a test.]

[You have received 100 Design Points for designing a mech with a trace of X-Factor.]

[Design Evaluation: Evaporating Spear...]

[You have received 1000 Design Points for completing an original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 100 Design Points for designing a mech with a trace of X-Factor.]

[Design Evaluation: Enduring Protector]

Model name: Enduring Protector

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson

Weight Classification: Light

Recommended Role: Laser Frontline Mech

Armor: E-

Carrying Capacity: F

Aesthetics: D

Endurance: B

Energy Efficiency: C+

Flexibility: F+

Firepower: E+

Integrity: A

Mobility: F+

Spotting: E

X-Factor: C++

Cost efficiency: A

Project involvement: 100%

Original component composition: 12%

Overall evaluation: The Enduring Protector is a barebones laser frontline mech intended to serve a very specialized purpose. It requires a minimum amount of maintenance to remain operational.

[You have received 1000 Design Points for completing an original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 500 Design Points for designing a mech with a moderate presence of X-Factor.]

"Who cares about my old designs!" Ves admonished the System cheerfully kept bombarding him with outdated announcements. "Gimme the good stuff! What's my current Status!"

After his System finished its lengthy queue of messages, it finally presented him with his Status.

Ves widened his eyes in astonishment as he immediately honed in on his DP earnings. He grinned and laughed. "I'm rich!"

Not even tens of billions of credits could make him feel so rich!

Chapter 1069 Allround Improvements

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 421,612

Attributes

Strength: 1.4

Dexterity: 1.0

Endurance: 2.0

Intelligence: 2.2

Creativity: 2.1

Concentration: 2.1

Spirituality: 0.8

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

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

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

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Apprentice - [Mech Hacking II]

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

[Materials Science]: Journeyman - [Crystallography II] [Crystal Laser Propagation II]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman

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

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression III]

[Metaphysics]: Apprentice - [X-Factor IV] - [Spiritual Vision II] - [Spiritual Exploration I]

[Interfacing]: Novice

[Physics]: Senior - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization III] [Gamma Laser Weapons I] [Lightweight Armor Optimization II] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization IV] [Melee Weapon Optimization IV] [Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation II] [Optics III]

[Propulsion]: Incompetent - [Flight Systems I]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice - [Field Repairs III]

[Signals and Communications]: Journeyman - [Anti-Stealth Detection II]

[Stealth and Cloaking]: Novice

Abilities

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

Evaluation: A post-human mech designer who has almost advanced to Journeyman.

"Over four-hundred thousand Design Points!" Ves uttered.

Was that a lot? Sure! Could he have done better? Certainly!

Ves could have earned a lot more DP if he continued to lead the company and expand its mech catalog.

By far the greatest source of DP over the past three years had been the steady sales of his Blackbeak models. The silver label edition proved to be a resilient seller and though the bronze label edition weren't being produced very much anymore, they still made a hefty contribution to his DP earnings.

"It's too bad my Crystal Lord isn't able to earn me any DP. I could have easily doubled my stash of DP if I hadn't Superpublished that design."

Even though he had already made peace with this tradeoff, he couldn't help but wince at the thought of how much DP slipped through his fingers.

Aside from his physical mech sales, his virtual mechs also sold a lot over the years. The only downside was that his most popular virtual training mechs such as the Old Soul and the Young Blood already reached the System's stingy DP earning limits. Ves could have easily earned twice or even thrice as much DP if not for those caps.

"Well, I'm long past the days where I need to depend on virtual mechs for practice." Ves muttered.

While it would only take him a couple of weeks to design a proper virtual mech, to Journeymen and upwards, it was generally considered to be a waste of time. They only had a finite amount of lifespan to spend on advancing to the rank of Senior, and no Journeyman ever got there by designing virtual mechs all the time.

However, even though designing virtual mechs wouldn't help him advance to Senior, it still served as a useful testing ground for some experimental concepts.

Ves could do a lot with four-hundred thousand DP. Perhaps the most extreme way to spend them all was if he dumped it all on bronze or silver lottery tickets.

"I'd be stupid if I waste all that money on your rip-off of a lottery draw." Ves muttered resentfully at the System.

It would be a different story if Ves had the option of purchasing golden lottery tickets and higher. Even though the chance of winning a prize with a golden lottery ticket was fairly low, he once scored a huge win when he obtained a copy of the Amastendira. This single prize alone had been worth all of the dangers he went through when he participated in the Glowing Planet campaign!

The best investment of his DP remained spending them on Skills and Sub-Skills. He sorely felt he needed to shore up his knowledge base now that he embarked on a complicated joint design project in collaboration with a Senior.

"I'll have to be prudent in my spending. I can't ignore the role that items play either."

His constant inadequacies regarding the gear he'd been issued made him realize how much of a role it played. Several times, Ves only hung on because he managed to retain possession of the Amastendira.

While it was a very good weapon, it couldn't help him out of every crisis. Now that he had left military service, he could finally pick and choose his own equipment.

"I still have some goodies in the vault." He smiled. "I'll have to pay a visit there to pick up my shield generator at the very least."

He didn't plan on retrieving his spoils from the Starlight Megalodon. It would be a bit too extreme to be walking around wearing the Squalon in his own headquarters.

After Ves got over the bounty of DP he earned, he turned his attention to the other changes in his Status. As he studied the rest of the list, he perceived overall improvement in many Attributes and Skills.

The change in his Attributes encompassed both his physical and mental aspects. All the genetic and corrective treatments he redeemed from the Starlight Megalodon boosted his body comprehensively.

"The System doesn't even list most of my recent gains in this area such as my extended lifespan."

His mental Attributes rose as well. Perhaps the most drastic change would be his Spirituality. For some reason, it rose by 0.4 points! Whether this meant his

Spirituality increased in a linear or geometric fashion, Ves couldn't tell because he hadn't developed a good measuring stick for this ephemeral energy source.

Aside from his hugely improved Spirituality Attribute, his list of Skills showed huge jumps as well.

Ves distinctly noticed the addition of several new Sub-Skills which he hadn't redeemed any DP for in the Skill Tree.

"Sub-Skills such as Ultracompact Batteries I, Field Repairs III, Spiritual Vision II and Spiritual Exploration I weren't there the last time I checked my Status. I've also become a Novice in the field of Stealth and Cloaking."

In addition, many of his older Sub-Skills received some bumps in ranking, likely due to his stint as head designer when he served with the Flagrant Vandals. His proficiencies in working with 3D printers and assembly systems received a welcome boost, and that was just one of many improvements he made over the years.

The extensive amount of changes signified to Ves that he didn't have to rely on the System's Skill Tree to acquire or improve his Skills and Sub-Skills. He could always study on his own or learn from practice.

"Each method has its own merits."

Overall, his set of Skills already matched the repertoire of a seasoned Journeyman such as Kadar and Neyvis. In fact, he was grossly overqualified for an Apprentice.

Ves did not feel a strong urge to upgrade more of his main Skills to Senior as of yet. His Senior-level Physics Skill mainly introduced a huge bunch of esoteric knowledge in his mind which only became relevant in highly specialized applications. His main benefit from improving his Physics Skill was

that he became more knowledgeable when it came to designing energy weapons.

"If I do upgrade a main Skill to Senior-level, I'll start with my Mechanics Skill first."

If he did so, he would have to complete an Upgrade Mission assigned by the System, which was a bit of a hassle.

Overall, Ves was pleased with his improvements over the years. Compared to when he last used the System, he was a lot more rounded and his utilization of his Skills had improved as well.

"Not everything is listed on my Status page." He reminded to himself. "Just because it's not on the list doesn't mean it isn't important."

Now that Ves satisfied his curiosity for the moment, he began to look at his comm more critically. While Lucky leisurely floated above his head, he wanted to address the System directly.

"Tell me." He began. "Are you the Metal Scroll?"

Silence. The System adopted its usual silent treatment in response to Ves' prodding questions.

Ves pressed his lips. "Come now. You managed to keep track of my design work while I was separated from you so you must be aware of what I've learned at the Starlight Megalodon. The 'so-called' Mech Designer System is just a facade of yours, right? Your true identity is the long-lost mythical Metal Scroll worshipped by the Five Scrolls Compact!"

[...]

"Really. I don't know why you keep up that dumb AI act, but it's not fooling me anymore. I've encountered a lot of AIs over the years, and you are definitely more sophisticated than you appear. All this time, I've been using you as a

vending machine, never fully comprehending that you must have your own agenda as well. Now that I know the truth about your origins, isn't it time for you to come clean with me?"

[...]

Evidently, the System adamantly maintained its silence to the pressing queries. Perhaps it thought that Ves was too weak. Perhaps it had been programmed to keep shut on this topic.

Since Ves possessed no leverage on the System, he couldn't force it to talk. What could he do? Discard it into a black hole? It would probably teleport away and abandon Ves to find a new and more pliable user or something.

After a bit more fruitless questioning, Ves gave up. "Fine. Have it your way. I'll just continue to play along and design more mechs if that's what you want."

[A mech designer must never cease to design mechs.]

"Pff! Now you open up your mouth!"

After Ves set aside his questions concerning the System, he returned to the question of where he should spend his DP on. Those four-hundred thousand points didn't do anything to him as long as they remained unspent.

"First, I should set aside 100,000 DP again." He decided.

If he ever fell into trouble, which would certainly happen sooner or later considering his track record, he could draw upon this amount to redeem a powerful one-time tool or augment to help him survive.

That left a bit over 300,000 DP for him to spend wherever he wished. When Ves idly browsed the Skill Tree, he became astounded once again at the sheer variety of Skills and Sub-Skills the System offered.

However, not all of them were valued equally. Ves distinctly noticed that Sub-Skills related to high technology came with inflated DP costs along with hefty prerequisites!

For example, if Ves wanted to acquire Ultracompact Energy Storage II, he needed to fork over 2,000,000 DP to the System!

"What the hell?! How can you be so greedy, System!"

Just as it seemed that Ves was about to accelerate his DP earnings, the reality was that the truly valuable Sub-Skills still required a hefty amount of investment!

That 300,000 DP didn't seem to extravagant anymore. Ves felt like he was back in the days where he thought that earning a couple of thousand DP already made him wealthy.

"I'll just have to put my available points to the best possible use."

Right now, Ves already felt he lacked some essential Sub-Skills when it came to designing his upcoming super-medium space knight. His unfamiliarity with its weight class, flight system, polarizing module and more would definitely hamper him once he moved on to the next design phase.

"If I want to do my fatty mech design justice, I will need to shore up on my lack of design experience with spaceborn mechs."

Like many mech designers, Ves started his career with designing landbound mechs. While that was all well and good, he didn't feel confident in being able to incorporate a flight system effectively and efficiently in his upcoming design. He simply lacked too much experience in this area.

"I can take the time to study it myself, but it's much faster and more convenient if I upgrade my understanding of flight systems."

Aside from shoring up this essential point, Ves also couldn't forget about another option. He began to consider whether it would be worth it for him to invest a substantial amount of DP into acquiring Space Knight Mastery I.

Chapter 1070 Inflated Prices

Mastery provided Ves with a first-hand perspective on how mech pilots handled a specific mech type. It was immensely valuable and he considered it worth its hefty price tag.

Even so, Ves already possessed a Mastery in landbound knight mechs. Would he really be able to gain as much benefits when he acquired a Mastery in its spaceborn version?

After some contemplation, he decided to add Space Knight Mastery I to his list.

"Spaceborn mechs are vastly different from landbound mechs. The three-dimensional aspect of moving and fighting in space as well as concerns about vacuum, inertia, momentum, flight, heat management and more add a lot more complexities to the equation."

In general, mech pilots found it harder to pilot spaceborn mechs. The barrier to entry may be higher, but they were paid a bit better than their landbound colleagues.

All of these added complexities made piloting spaceborn mechs incomparable to piloting landbound mechs. Ves saw a lot of merit in acquiring the relevant Mastery, even if it wouldn't be in the right weight class.

[Space Knight Mastery I]: 40,000 DP

"Next up is to improve my understanding of flight systems."

This entailed upgrading the Propulsion Skill and the generic Flight System I Sub-Skill.

The former encompassed many ways to move mechs aside from using legs. It encompassed a broad understanding of flight in the air and in space. It also included some fundamental understanding on water-jet propulsion used by aquatic mechs.

"Let's just skip the years of learning and bump it straight up into Journeyman territory. I'll improve my expertise on flight systems specifically while I'm at it."

[Propulsion - Novice]: 5,000 DP

[Propulsion - Apprentice]: 10,000 DP

[Propulsion - Journeyman]: 20,000 DP

[Flight Systems II]: 2,500 DP

[Flight Systems III]: 5,000 DP

[Flight Systems IV]: 10,000 DP

Ves could already feel the System rubbing its greedy non-existent hands as he added more Skills to the shopping cart. Even though it seemed somewhat luxurious for him to spend this much DP just on the flight system alone, he considered it essential for him to match the competence of a mech designer specialized in spaceborn mechs.

Only a few minutes went by and Ves already planned to dump 92,500 DP onto various Skills and Sub-Skills!

"That's almost a third of my DP budget gone!"

Nonetheless, these new additions solved his most critical inadequacies when it came to designing his super-medium space knight. With a Mastery and a vastly improved understanding of flight systems, he didn't fear the prospects of mistakes any longer. Not only that, he would also be able to incorporate various aspects unique to spaceborn mechs a lot better into other areas of his design.

Many laymen had the mistaken impression that spaceborn mechs were actually landbound mechs with flight systems slapped onto their backs. That was a gross simplification of the truth, as the lack of gravity and air in space led to a much greater divergence in design standards.

Ves learned many of these rules when he came into touch with many spaceborn mechs as a head designer. However, repairing spaceborn mechs was one thing. Designing them from scratch was an entirely different thing.

"The last mistake I can make in this design project is to underestimate the challenges of designing a spaceborn mech!"

After some more thought, he added a Sub-Skill related to polarizing modules to his list. This would not only enable him to understand the working principles of this piece of technology, but also be able to tinker with it and adjust its parameters.

[Polarizing Shielding I]: 20,000 DP

[Polarizing Shielding II]: 40,000 DP

Unfortunately, the System regarded polarizing technology as something advanced, so it jacked up the prices for understanding it by a corresponding proportion.

For a while, Ves questioned whether he was spending his DP wisely. Polarizing technology did not see much use in the Bright Republic. The modules took up way too much space to be applicable to anything but heavy mechs.

However, the tech was a bit more ubiquitous among second-class mechs such as those circulating in the Friday Coalition. It was possible to miniaturize the polarizing modules so that it became practical for them to be implemented in medium mechs as long as expensive exotics took over the role of regular materials.

Ves could bear the price for Polarizing Shielding I. Yet he wasn't satisfied with understanding the bare essentials. He wanted to tweak the polarizing module and tailor it to his upcoming design. That required a lot more understanding, and to meet that need he would have to get Polarizing Shielding II.

"It's still a hefty price to pay just to improve a single mech design a little better."

He decided to bite the bullet and add the second tier of this line of Sub-Skills to his shopping cart. He rationalized it as an investment. In order to earn more DP, he needed to spend more DP.

"If I invest 60,000 DP into this Sub-Skill so that I can bump the quality of my space knight design to another level, the extra sales I get in return might pay back my investment in spades."

His fatty mech design would definitely be a niche product that lacked the slightly wider appeal of his other two commercial mech designs. Since the target segment of his space knight would be those who specialized in piloting space knight, Ves needed to offer them a product with excellent performance.

The polarizing module was the key gimmick of his space knight design. Being able to implement it proficiently and without introducing flaws or vulnerabilities would make or break his product!

"Alright, that's almost half of my DP budget gone."

Ves couldn't help but grumble about the System's inflated prices. Even though he agreed that it was only fair that the System charged more for rarer and more exclusive Skills and Sub-Skills, as a consumer he couldn't help but feel as if he was being ripped off.

Still, this led Ves to an important question. "What is DP anyway?"

The System presented him with Design Points as its internal currency which Ves could redeem for various goodies. All this time, he regarded DP in a similar fashion to merits used in many organizations such as the Clifford Society and the CFA.

The concept behind merits was simple. Merits represented actual contribution earned by individuals. It was not money that could be traded or given away freely. Thereby, organizations were able to level the field for the less affluent.

If the poor worked harder than the rich, then they ought to be rewarded for their earnestness. Issuing merits was a way of recognizing their individual hard work. As for useless rich fops, they may be able to buy their way into their positions, but if they wanted to get further, they couldn't solely rely on their wealth and connections to get them ahead.

Ves equated Design Points akin to merits because that was how the System operated on the surface. Yet now that he adopted a more critical mindset, he couldn't help but ask what Design Points actually represented?

"How do Design Points benefit the System?" He openly asked.

This was a very important question. For example, the Groening Mission that Ves participated in allowed him to earn a generous amount of merits from the Clifford Society.

The Society did not hand over these merits for free, but rather gained a substantial commission from House Kaine.

House Kaine in turn gave the Society some concessions in return for Ves' service.

"Everyone gets something of value, whether it's money, merits or services. Nobody loses out in this transaction."

The question that Ves had right now was how the System could possibly benefit from incentivizing Ves with Design Points. Ves did not believe that this was just a fictional currency programmed into the System in order to incentivize good mech design.

"Even the System must pay some sort of price whenever it injects a Skill into my mind or materializes a new item."

However, aside from providing the System with some exceedingly rare materials, Ves mostly earned the System's appreciation by designing mechs.

"It all comes down to designing mechs. Why mechs? What's so special about them? For the supposedly mythical Metal Scrolls which contains knowledge on how to design the armament of the gods, you sure possess a one-track mind, System."

Well, Ves couldn't blame the System for being brain-damaged. If the stories he heard were correct, then the Metal Scroll had been inadvertently destroyed during a secret power struggle.

Even if it managed to recover, it obviously only regained a fraction of its former might. Maybe the Metal Scroll itself might even have been fractured into several pieces, each encompassing a single domain of weapons!

That was a frightening thought. What if there was a System out there for designing infantry equipment or starships?

Ves shook his head. Even if other fragments of the Metal Scroll existed somewhere across the galaxy, it had nothing to do with him. He was already content with the System's narrow focus on mechs. To a mech designer, that mattered the most.

In the end, Ves could speculate all he wanted but he didn't come any closer to a solid answer.

"The System rewards me with DP whenever I design a mech or sell a mech. The amount of DP it rewards me varies according to the results I've achieved. Higher quality designs are worth a lot more DP than crappy designs. I also earn more DP from sales when my mechs are more expensive and are bought in higher volumes."

These specific patterns led Ves to believe they corresponded with the core activities of a mech designer. If Ves tried to maximize his DP earnings, then his actions and behavior would conform to mech designers who continued to progress and advance.

Simply said, the System wanted him to keep advancing!

Ves couldn't help but send a suspicious glance to his comm. Why did the System want him to advance so badly? Did it want something in return from Ves once he advanced to Master or something? That might be a very real possibility.

If Ves believed the Mech Designer System was just a simple piece of amazing software meant to help a mech designer without any further expectations, then he would be truly naive.

The System first put him on the path to specializing in Spirituality. The System also seemed to have a vested interest in helping him progress his mech designer career.

It was as if the System was feeding a pig to the slaughter!

Ves couldn't get rid of his paranoia. From all the secrets he learned during his military service, he stopped believing in altruism. Nobody did anything for free or without a reason. Individuals always aimed to secure benefits for themselves, and Ves bet that the System was no exception to this rule.

When Ves came back to the question where the System gained the energy or resources to do its magic, he threw out a guess. "Design Points are just standing in for something else, maybe."

Perhaps the act of creation and the act of propagation those creations injected the System with some sort of unknown energy that sustained its operation.

"Could it be spiritual energy?"

Out of all the options, spiritual energy seemed to fit the bill. However, there was no use speculating any further on this topic because Ves would never be able to force an answer out of the System at his current state.

Ves threw a scheming glance at his comm. "Someday, I'll force some answers out of you. It might take years, decades or centuries, but I have a long lifespan and plan to extend it even further. I have all the time in the galaxy to find out what you are and how my parents got involved."

After setting aside his suspicions, he turned his attention back to improving his knowledge base. He inspected his shopping cart several times before he decided that this was enough to put him on the right track. If he ever felt he lacked some expertise, he could always come back another time.

"I don't think I'll be separated from the System ever again for a very long time."